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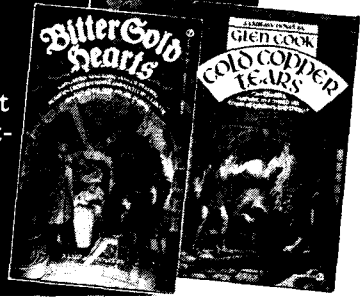

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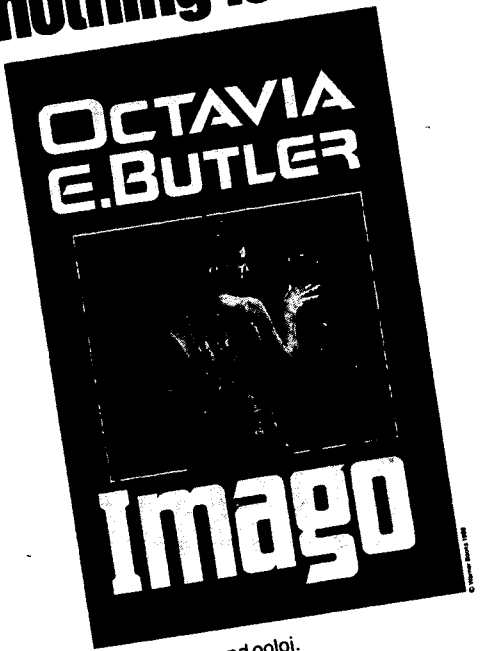

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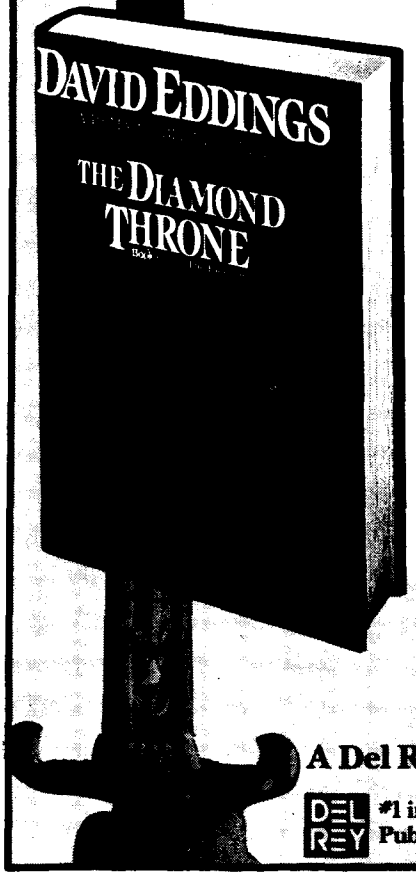

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Nancy Etchemendy ("The Sailor's Bargain" April 1989) returns with a story about a priceless and terrifying sculpture. It is a tale of horror, but more than anything else, the author says, it deals with chaos — the old nemesis of the artist.

Cat in Glass

By Nancy Etchemendy

I WAS ONCE A respectable woman. Oh yes, I know that's what they all say when they've reached a pass like mine: I was well educated, well traveled, had lovely children and a nice husband with a good financial mind. How can anyone have fallen so far, except one who deserved to anyway? I've had time aplenty to consider the matter, lying here eyeless in this fine hospital bed while the stench of my wounds increases. The matrons who guard my room are tight-lipped. But I heard one of them whisper yesterday, when she thought I was asleep, "Jesus, how could anyone do such a thing?" The answer to all these questions is the same. I have fallen so far, and I have done what I have done, to save us each and every one from the *Cat in Glass*.

My entanglement with the cat began fifty-two years ago, when my sister, Delia, was attacked by an animal. It happened on an otherwise ordinary spring afternoon. There were no witnesses. My father was still

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in his office at the college, and I was dawdling along on my way home from first grade at Chesly Girls' Day School, counting cracks in the sidewalk. Delia, younger than I by three years, was alone with Fiona, the Irish woman who kept house for us. Fiona had just gone outside for a moment to hang laundry. She came in to check on Delia, and discovered a scene of almost unbelievable carnage. Oddly, she had heard no screams.

As I ran up the steps and opened our door, I heard screams indeed. Not Delia's — for Delia had nothing left to scream with — but Fiona's, as she stood in the front room with her hands over her eyes. She couldn't bear the sight. Unfortunately, six-year-olds have no such compunction. I stared long and hard, sick and trembling, yet entranced.

From the shoulders up, Delia was no longer recognizable as a human being. Her throat had been shredded and her jaw ripped away. Most of her hair and scalp were gone. There were long, bloody furrows in the creamy skin of her arms and legs. The organdy pinafore in which Fiona had dressed her that morning was clotted with blood, and the blood was still coming. Some of the walls were even spattered with it where the animal, whatever it was, had worried her in its frenzy. Her fists and heels banged jerkily against the floor. Our pet dog, Freddy, lay beside her, also bloody, but quite limp. Freddy's neck was broken.

I remember slowly raising my head — I must have been in shock by then — and meeting the bottomless gaze of the glass cat that sat on the hearth. Our father, a professor of art history, was very proud of this sculpture, for reasons I did not understand until many years later. I only knew that it was valuable and we were not allowed to touch it. A chaotic feline travesty, it was not the sort of thing you would want to touch anyway. Though basically catlike in shape, it bristled with transparent threads and shards. There was something at once wild and vaguely human about its face. I had never liked it much, and Delia had always been downright frightened of it. On this day, as I looked up from my little sister's ruins, the cat seemed to glare at me with bright, terrifying satisfaction.

I had experienced, a year before, the thing every child fears most: the death of my mother. It had given me a kind of desperate strength, for I thought, at the tender age of six, that I had survived the worst life had to offer. Now, as I returned the mad stare of the glass cat, it came to me that I was wrong. The world was a much more evil place than I had ever imagined, and nothing would ever be the same again.

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* * *

Delia died officially in the hospital a short time later. After a cursory investigation, the police laid the blame on Freddy. I still have the newspaper clipping, yellow now, and held together with even yellower cellophane tape. "The family dog lay dead near the victim, blood smearing its muzzle and forepaws. Sergeant Morton theorizes that the dog, a pit bull terrier and member of a breed specifically developed for vicious fighting, turned killer and attacked its tragic young owner. He also suggests that the child, during the death struggle, flung the murderous beast away with enough strength to break its neck."

Even I, a little girl, knew that this "theory" was lame; the neck of a pit bull is an almost impossible thing to break, even by a large, determined man. And Freddy, in spite of his breeding, had always been gentle, even protective, with us. Simply stated, the police were mystified, and this was the closest thing to a rational explanation they could produce. As far as they were concerned, that was the end of the matter. In fact, it had only just begun.

I was shipped off to my Aunt Josie's house for several months. What Father did during this time, I never knew, though I now suspect he spent those months in a sanatorium. In the course of a year, he had lost first his wife and then his daughter. Delia's death alone was the kind of outrage that might permanently have unhinged a lesser man. But a child has no way of knowing such things. I was bitterly angry at him for going away. Aunt Josie, though kind and good-hearted, was a virtual stranger to me, and I felt deserted. I had nightmares in which the glass cat slunk out of its place by the hearth and prowled across the countryside. I would hear its hard claws ticking along the floor outside the room where I slept. At those times, half-awake and screaming in the dark, no one could have comforted me except Father.

When he did return, the strain of his suffering showed. His face was thin and weary, and his hair dusted with new gray, as if he had stood outside too long on a frosty night. On the afternoon of his arrival, he sat with me on Aunt Josie's sofa, stroking my cheek while I cuddled gladly, my anger at least temporarily forgotten in the joy of having him back.

His voice, when he spoke, was as tired as his face. "Well, my darling Amy, what do you suppose we should do now?"

"I don't know," I said. I assumed that, as always in the past, he had

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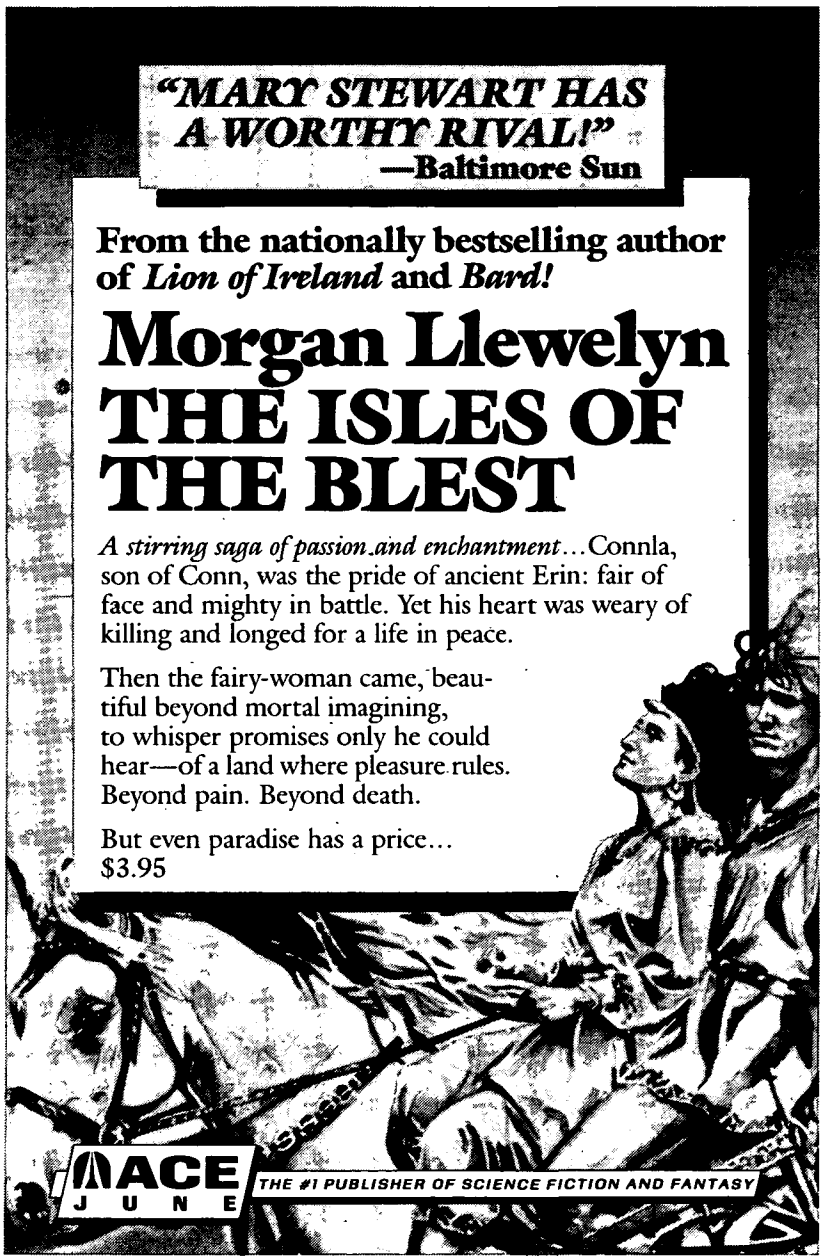

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something entertaining in mind — that he would suggest it, and then we would do it.

He sighed. "Shall we go home?"

I went practically rigid with fear. "Is the cat still there?"

Father looked at me, frowning slightly. "Do we have a cat?"

I nodded. "The big glass one."

He blinked, then made the connection. "Oh, the Chelichev, you mean? Well . . . I suppose it's still there. I hope so, in fact."

I clung to him, scrambling halfway up his shoulders in my panic. I could not manage to speak. All that came out of my mouth was an erratic series of whimpers.

"Shhhh, shhhh," said Father. I hid my face in the starched white cloth of his shirt, and heard him whisper, as if to himself, "How can a glass cat frighten a child who's seen the things you've seen?"

"I hate him! He's glad Delia died. And now he wants to get *me*."

Father hugged me fiercely. "You'll never see him again. I promise you," he said. And it was true, at least as long as he lived.

SO THE Chelichev *Cat in Glass* was packed away in a box and put into storage with the rest of our furnishings. Father sold the house, and we traveled for two years. When the horror had faded sufficiently, we returned home to begin a new life. Father went back to his professorship, and I to my studies at Chesly Girls' Day School. He bought a new house. The glass cat was not among the items he had sent up from storage. I did not ask him why. I was just as happy to forget about it, and forget it I did.

I neither saw the glass cat nor heard of it again until many years later. I was a grown woman by then, a schoolteacher in a town far from the one in which I'd spent my childhood. I was married to a banker, and had two lovely daughters and even a cat, which I finally permitted in spite of my abhorrence for them, because the girls begged so hard for one. I thought my life was settled, that it would progress smoothly toward a peaceful old age. But this was not to be. The glass cat had other plans.

The chain of events began with Father's death. It happened suddenly, on a snowy afternoon, as he graded papers in the tiny, snug office he had always had on campus. A heart attack, they said. He was found seated at his desk, Erik Satie's Dadaist composition "La Belle Excentrique" still

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spinning on the turntable of his record player.

I was not at all surprised to discover that he had left his affairs in some disarray. It's not that he had debts or was a gambler. Nothing so serious. It's just that order was slightly contrary to his nature. I remember once, as a very young woman, chiding him for the modest level of chaos he preferred in his life. "Really, Father," I said. "Can't you admire Dadaism without living it?" He laughed and admitted that he didn't seem able to.

As Father's only living relative, I inherited his house and other property, including his personal possessions. There were deeds to be transferred, insurance reports to be filed, bills and loans to be paid. He did have an attorney, an old school friend of his who helped a great deal in organizing the storm of paperwork from a distance. The attorney also arranged for the sale of the house and hired someone to clean it out and ship the contents to us. In the course of the winter, a steady stream of cartons containing everything from scrapbooks to Chinese miniatures arrived at our doorstep. So I thought nothing of it when a large box labeled "fragile" was delivered one day by registered courier. There was a note from the attorney attached, explaining that he had just discovered it in a storage warehouse under Father's name, and had had them ship it to me unopened.

It was a dismal February afternoon, a Friday. I had just come home from teaching. My husband, Stephen, had taken the girls to the mountains for a weekend of skiing, a sport I disliked. I had stayed behind and was looking forward to a couple of days of quiet solitude. The wind drove spittles of rain at the windows as I knelt on the floor of the front room and opened the box. I can't explain to you quite what I felt when I pulled away the packing paper and found myself face-to-face with the glass cat. Something akin to uncovering a nest of cockroaches in a drawer of sachet, I suppose. And that was swiftly followed by a horrid and minutely detailed mental re-creation of Delia's death.

I swallowed my screams, struggling to replace them with something rational. "It's merely a glorified piece of glass." My voice bounced off the walls in the lonely house, hardly comforting.

I had an overpowering image of something inside me, something dark and featureless except for wide white eyes and scrabbling claws. *Get us out of here!* it cried, and I obliged, seizing my coat from the closet hook and stumbling out into the wind.

I ran in the direction of town, slowing only when one of my shoes

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fell off and I realized how I must look. Soon I found myself seated at a table in a diner, warming my hands in the steam from a cup of coffee, trying to convince myself that I was just being silly. I nursed the coffee as long as I could. It was dusk by the time I felt able to return home. There I found the glass cat, still waiting for me.

I turned on the radio for company and made a fire in the fireplace. Then I sat down before the box and finished unpacking it. The sculpture was as horrible as I remembered, truly ugly and disquieting. I might never have understood why Father kept it if he had not enclosed this letter of explanation, neatly handwritten on his college stationery:

To whom it may concern:

This box contains a sculpture, Cat in Glass, *designed and executed by the late Alexander Chelichev. Because of Chelichev's standing as a noted forerunner of Dadaism, a historical account of* Cat's *genesis may be of interest to scholars.*

I purchased Cat *from the artist himself at his Zurich loft in December 1915, two months before the violent rampage that resulted in his confinement in a hospital for the criminally insane, and well before his artistic importance was widely recognized. (For the record, the asking price was forty-eight Swiss francs, plus a good meal with wine.) It is known that Chelichev had a wife and two children elsewhere in the city at that time, though he lived with them only sporadically. The following is the artist's statement about* Cat in Glass, *transcribed as accurately as possible from a conversation we held during dinner.*

"I have struggled with the Devil all my life. He wants no rules. No order. His presence is everywhere in my work. I was beaten as a child, and when I became strong enough, I killed my father for it. I see you are skeptical, but it is true. Now I am a grown man, and I find my father in myself. I have a wife and children, but I spend little time with them because I fear the father-devil in me. I do not beat my children. Instead, I make this cat. Into the glass I have poured this madness of mine. Better there than in the eyes of my daughters."

It is my belief that Cat in Glass *was Chelichev's last finished creation.*

Sincerely,
Lawrence Waters
Professor of Art History

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* * *

I closed the box, sealed it with the note inside, and spent the next two nights in a hotel, pacing the floor, sleeping little. The following Monday, Stephen took the cat to an art dealer for appraisal. He came home late that afternoon excited and full of news about the great Alexander Chelichev.

He made himself a gin and tonic as he expounded. "That glass cat is priceless, Amy. Did you realize? If your father had sold it, he'd have been independently wealthy. He never let on."

I was putting dinner on the table. The weekend had been a terrible strain. This had been a difficult day on top of it — snowy, and the children in my school class were wild with pent-up energy. So were our daughters, Eleanor and Rose, aged seven and four, respectively. I could hear them quarreling in the playroom down the hall.

"Well, I'm glad to hear the horrid thing is worth something," I said. "Why don't we sell it and hire a maid?"

Stephen laughed as if I'd made an incredibly good joke. "A maid? You could hire a thousand maids for what that cat would bring at auction. It's a fascinating piece with an extraordinary history. You know, the value of something like this will increase with time. I think we'll do well to keep it awhile."

My fingers grew suddenly icy on the hot rim of the potato bowl. "I wasn't trying to be funny, Stephen. It's ugly and disgusting. If I could, I would make it disappear from the face of the earth."

He raised his eyebrows. "What's this? Rebellion? Look, if you really want a maid, I'll get you one."

"That's not the point. I won't have the damned thing in my house."

"I'd rather you didn't swear, Amelia. The children might hear."

"I don't care if they do."

The whole thing degenerated from there. I tried to explain the cat's connection with Delia's death. But Stephen had stopped listening by then. He sulked through dinner. Eleanor and Rose argued over who got which spoonful of peas. And I struggled with a steadily growing sense of dread that seemed much too large for the facts of the matter.

When dinner was over, Stephen announced with exaggerated brightness, "Girls. We'd like your help in deciding an important question."

"Oh goody," said Rose.

"What is it?" said Eleanor.

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"Please don't," I said. It was all I could do to keep from shouting.

Stephen flashed me the boyish grin with which he had originally won my heart. "Oh, come on. Try to look at it objectively. You're just sensitive about this because of an irrational notion from your childhood. Let the girls be the judge. If they like it, why not keep it?"

I should have ended it there. I should have insisted. Hindsight is always perfect, as they say. But inside me a little seed of doubt had sprouted. Stephen was always so logical and so right, especially about financial matters. Maybe he was right about this, too.

He had brought the thing home from the appraiser without telling me. He was never above a little subterfuge if it got him his own way. Now he carried the carton in from the garage and unwrapped it in the middle of our warm hardwood floor with all the lights blazing. Nothing had changed. I found it as frightening as ever. I could feel cold sweat collecting on my forehead as I stared at it, all aglitter in a rainbow of refracted lamplight.

Eleanor was enthralled with it. She caught our real cat, a calico named Jelly, and held it up to the sculpture. "See, Jelly? You've got a handsome partner now." But Jelly twisted and hissed in Eleanor's arms until she let her go. Eleanor laughed and said Jelly was jealous.

Rose was almost as uncooperative as Jelly. She shrank away from the glass cat, peeking at it from between her father's knees. But Stephen would have none of that.

"Go on, Rose," he said. "It's just a kitty made of glass. Touch it and see." And he took her by the shoulders and pushed her gently toward it. She put out one hand, hesitantly, as she would have with a live cat who did not know her. I saw her finger touch a nodule of glass shards that might have been its nose. She drew back with a little yelp of pain. And that's how it began. So innocently.

"He bit me!" she cried.

"What happened?" said Stephen. "Did you break it?" He ran to the sculpture first, the brute, to make sure she hadn't damaged it.

She held her finger out to me. There was a tiny cut with a single drop of bright red blood oozing from it. "Mommy, it burns, it burns." She was no longer just crying. She was screaming.

We took her into the bathroom. Stephen held her while I washed the cut and pressed a cold cloth to it. The bleeding stopped in a moment, but

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Rose was still screaming when Dr. Pepperman arrived fresh from his dinner.

still she screamed. Stephen grew angry. "What's this nonsense? It's a scratch. Just a scratch."

Rose jerked and kicked and bellowed. In Stephen's defense, I tell you now it was a terrifying sight, and he was never able to deal well with real fear, especially in himself. He always tried to mask it with anger. We had a neighbor who was a physician. "If you don't stop it, Rose, I'll call Dr. Pepperman. Is that what you want?" he said, as if Dr. Pepperman, a jolly septuagenarian, were anything but charming and gentle, as if threats were anything but asinine at such a time.

"For God's sake, get Pepperman! Can't you see something's terribly wrong?" I said.

And for once he listened to me. He grabbed Eleanor by the arm. "Come with me," he said, and stomped across the yard through the snow without so much as a coat. I believe he took Eleanor, also without a coat, only because he was so unnerved that he didn't want to face the darkness alone.

Rose was still screaming when Dr. Pepperman arrived fresh from his dinner, specks of gravy clinging to his mustache. He examined Rose's finger, and looked mildly puzzled when he had finished. "Can't see much wrong here. I'd say it's mostly a case of hysteria." He took a vial and a syringe from his small brown case and gave Rose an injection, ". . . to help settle her down," he said. It seemed to work. In a few minutes, Rose's screams had diminished to whimpers. Pepperman swabbed her finger with disinfectant and wrapped it loosely in gauze. "There, Rosie. Nothing like a bandage to make it feel better." He winked at us. "She should be fine in the morning. Take the gauze off as soon as she'll let you."

We put Rose to bed and sat with her till she fell asleep. Stephen unwrapped the gauze from her finger so the healing air could get to it. The cut was a bit red, but looked all right. Then we retired as well, reassured by the doctor, still mystified at Rose's reaction.

I awakened sometime after midnight. The house was muffled in the kind of silence brought by steady, soft snowfall. I though I had heard a sound. Something odd. A scream? A groan? A snarl? Stephen still slept

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on the verge of a snore; whatever it was, it hadn't been loud enough to disturb him.

I crept out of bed and fumbled with my robe. There was a short flight of stairs between our room and the rooms where Rose and Eleanor slept. Eleanor, like her father, often snored at night, and I could hear her from the hallway now, probably deep in dreams. Rose's room was silent.

I went in and switched on the night-light. The bulb was very low wattage. I thought at first that the shadows were playing tricks on me. Rose's hand and arm looked black as a bruised banana. There was a peculiar odor in the air, like the smell of a butcher shop on a summer day. Heart galloping, I turned on the overhead light. Poor Rosie. She was so very still and clammy. And her arm was so very rotten.

They said Rose died from blood poisoning — a rare type most often associated with animal bites. I told them over and over again that it fit, that our child had indeed been bitten, by a cat, a most evil glass cat. Stephen was embarrassed. His own theory was that, far from blaming an apparently inanimate object, we ought to be suing Pepperman for malpractice. The doctors patted me sympathetically at first. Delusions brought on by grief, they said. It would pass. I would heal in time.

I made Stephen take the cat away. He said he would sell it, though in fact he lied to me. And we buried Rose. But I could not sleep. I paced the house each night, afraid to close my eyes because the cat was always there, glaring his satisfied glare, and waiting for new meat. And in the daytime, everything reminded me of Rosie. Fingerprints on the woodwork, the contents of the kitchen drawers, her favorite foods on the shelves of grocery stores. I could not teach. Every child had Rosie's face and Rosie's voice. Stephen and Eleanor were first kind, then gruff, then angry.

One morning I could find no reason to get dressed or to move from my place on the sofa. Stephen shouted at me, told me I was ridiculous, asked me if I had forgotten that I still had a daughter left who needed me. But, you see, I no longer believed that I or anyone else could make any difference in the world. Stephen and Eleanor would get along with or without me. I didn't matter. There was no God of order and cause. Only chaos, cruelty, and whim.

When it was clear to Stephen that his dear wife Amy had turned from an asset into a liability, he sent me to an institution, far away from

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everyone, where I could safely be forgotten. In time, I grew to like it there. I had no responsibilities at all. And if there was foulness and bedlam, it was no worse than the outside world.

There came a day, however, when they dressed me in a suit of new clothes and stood me outside the big glass and metal doors to wait; they didn't say for what. The air smelled good. It was springtime, and there were dandelions sprinkled like drops of fresh yellow paint across the lawn.

A car drove up, and a pretty young woman got out and took me by the arm.

"Hello, Mother," she said as we drove off down the road.

It was Eleanor, all grown up. For the first time since Rosie died, I wondered how long I had been away, and knew it must have been a very long while.

We drove a considerable distance, to a large suburban house, white, with a sprawling yard and a garage big enough for two cars. It was a mansion compared to the house in which Stephen and I had raised her. By way of making polite small talk, I asked if she were married, whether she had children. She climbed out of the car looking irritated. "Of course I'm married," she said. "You've met Jason. And you've seen pictures of Sarah and Elizabeth often enough." Of this I had no recollection.

She opened the gate in the picket fence, and we started up the neat stone walkway. The front door opened a few inches and small faces peered out. The door opened wider and two little girls ran onto the porch.

"Hello," I said. "And who are you?"

The older one, giggling behind her hand, said, "Don't you know, Grandma? I'm Sarah."

The younger girl stayed silent, staring at me with frank curiosity.

"That's Elizabeth. She's afraid of you," said Sarah.

I bent and looked into Elizabeth's eyes. They were brown and her hair was shining blonde, like Rosie's. "No need to be afraid of me, my dear. I'm just a harmless old woman."

Elizabeth frowned. "Are you crazy?" she asked.

Sarah giggled behind her hand again, and Eleanor breathed loudly through her nose as if this impertinence were simply overwhelming.

I smiled. I liked Elizabeth. Liked her very much. "They say I am," I said, "and it may very well be true."

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A tiny smile crossed her face. She stretched on her tiptoes and kissed my cheek, hardly more than the touch of a warm breeze, then turned and ran away. Sarah followed her, and I watched them go, my heart dancing and shivering. I had loved no one in a very long time. I missed it, but dreaded it, too. For I had loved Delia and Rosie, and they were both dead.

The first thing I saw when I entered the house was Chelichev's *Cat in Glass*, glaring evilly from a place of obvious honor on a low pedestal near the sofa. My stomach felt suddenly shrunken.

"Where did you get that?" I said.

Eleanor looked irritated again. "From Daddy, of course."

"Stephen promised me he would sell it!"

"Well, I guess he didn't, did he?"

Anger heightened my pulse. "Where is he? I want to speak to him immediately."

"Mother, don't be absurd. He's been dead for ten years."

I lowered myself into a chair. I was shaking by then, and I fancied I saw a half-smile on the glass cat's cold jowls.

"Get me out of here," I said. A great weight crushed my lungs. I could barely breathe.

With a look, I must say, of genuine worry, Eleanor escorted me onto the porch and brought me a tumbler of ice water.

"Better?" she asked.

I breathed deeply. "A little. Eleanor, don't you realize that monstrosity killed your sister, and mine as well?"

"That simply isn't true."

"But it is, it is! I'm telling you now, get rid of it if you care for the lives of your children."

Eleanor went pale, whether from rage or fear I could not tell. "It isn't yours. You're legally incompetent, and I'll thank you to stay out of my affairs as much as possible till you have a place of your own. I'll move you to an apartment as soon as I can find one."

"An apartment? But I can't. . . ."

"Yes, you can. You're as well as you're ever going to be, Mother. You liked that hospital only because it was easy. Well, it costs a lot of money to keep you there, and we can't afford it anymore. You're just going to have to straighten up and start behaving like a human being again."

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By then I was very close to tears, and very confused as well. Only one thing was clear to me, and that was the true nature of the glass cat. I said, in as steady a voice as I could muster, "Listen to me. That cat was made out of madness. It's evil. If you have a single ounce of brains, you'll put it up for auction this very afternoon."

"So I can get enough money to send you back to the hospital, I suppose? Well, I won't do it. That sculpture is priceless. The longer we keep it, the more it's worth."

She had Stephen's financial mind. I would never sway her, and I knew it. I wept in despair, hiding my face in my hands. I was thinking of Elizabeth. The sweet, soft skin of her little arms, the flame in her cheeks, the power of that small kiss. Human beings are such frail works of art, their lives so precarious, and here I was again, my wayward heart gone out to one of them. But the road back to the safety of isolation lay in ruins. The only way out was through.

Jason came home at dinnertime, and we ate a nice meal, seated around the sleek rosewood table in the dining room. He was kind, actually far kinder than Eleanor. He asked the children about their day and listened carefully while they replied. As did I, enraptured by their pink perfection, distraught at the memory of how imperfect a child's flesh can become. He did not interrupt. He did not demand. When Eleanor refused to give me coffee — she said she was afraid it would get me "hyped up" — he admonished her and poured me a cup himself. We talked about my father, whom he knew by reputation, and about art and the cities of Europe. All the while I felt in my bones the baleful gaze of the *Cat in Glass*, burning like the coldest ice through walls and furniture as if they did not exist.

Eleanor made up a cot for me in the guest room. She didn't want me to sleep in the bed, and she wouldn't tell me why. But I overheard Jason arguing with her about it. "What's wrong with the bed?" he said.

"She's mentally ill," said Eleanor. She was whispering, but loudly. "Heaven only knows what filthy habits she's picked up. I won't risk her soiling a perfectly good mattress. If she does well on the cot for a few nights, then we can consider moving her to the bed."

They thought I was in the bathroom, performing whatever unspeakable acts it is that mentally ill people perform in places like that, I suppose. But they were wrong. I was sneaking past their door, on my way to the

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garage. Jason must have been quite a handyman in his spare time. I found a large selection of hammers on the wall, including an excellent short-handled sledge. I hid it under my bedding. They never even noticed.

The children came in and kissed me good night in a surreal reversal of roles. I lay in the dark on my cot for a long time, thinking of them, especially Elizabeth, the youngest and weakest, who would naturally be the most likely target of an animal's attack. I dozed, dreaming sometimes of a smiling Elizabeth-Rose-Delia, sifting snow, wading through drifts; sometimes of the glass cat, its fierce eyes smoldering, crystalline tongue brushing crystalline jaws. The night was well along when the dreams crashed down like broken mirrors into silence.

The house was quiet except for those ticks and thumps all houses make as they cool in the darkness. I got up and slid the hammer out from under the bedding, not even sure what I was going to do with it, knowing only that the time had come to act.

I crept out to the front room, where the cat sat waiting, as I knew it must. Moonlight gleamed in the chaos of its glass fur. I could feel its power, almost *see* it, a shimmering red aura the length of its malformed spine. The thing was moving, slowly, slowly, smiling now, oh yes, a real smile. I could smell its rotten breath.

For an instant I was frozen. Then I remembered the hammer, Jason's lovely short-handled sledge. And I raised it over my head, and brought it down in the first crashing blow.

The sound was wonderful. Better than cymbals, better even than holy trumpets. I was trembling all over, but I went on and on in an agony of satisfaction while glass fell like moonlit rain. There were screams. "Grandma, stop! Stop!" I swung the hammer back in the first part of another arc, heard something like the thunk of a fallen ripe melon, swung it down on the cat again. I couldn't see anymore. It came to me that there was glass in my eyes and blood in my mouth. But none of that mattered, a small price to pay for the long-overdue demise of Chelichev's *Cat in Glass*.

So you see how I have come to this, not without many sacrifices along the way. And now the last of all: the sockets where my eyes used to be are infected. They stink. Blood poisoning, I'm sure.

I wouldn't expect Eleanor to forgive me for ruining her prime investment. But I hoped Jason might bring the children a time or two anyway.

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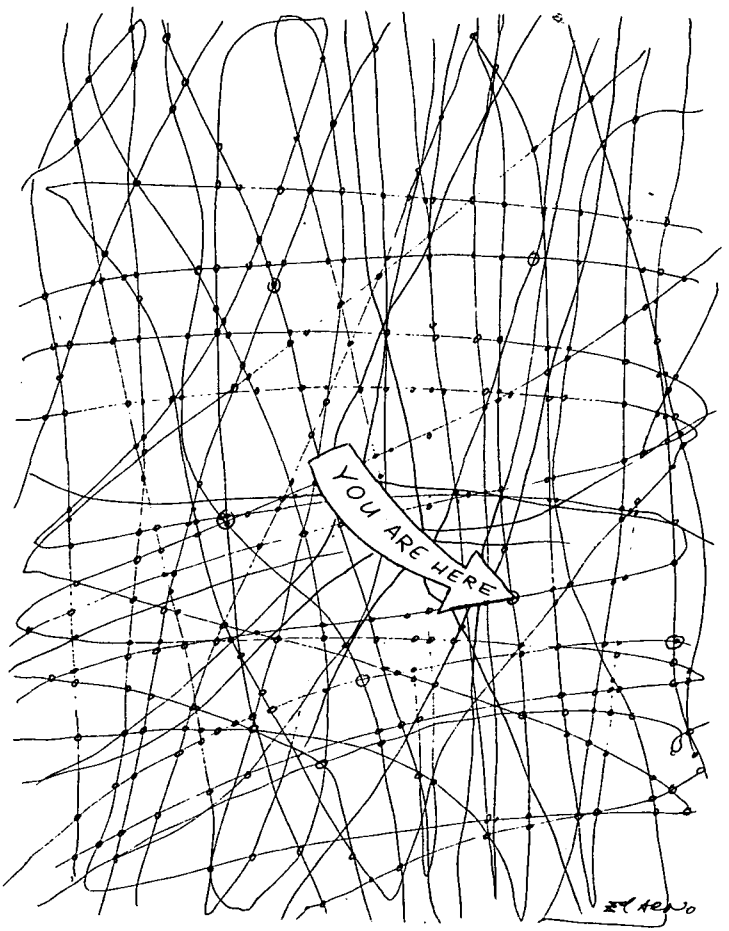
No word except for the delivery of a single rose yesterday. The matron said it was white, and held it up for me to sniff, and she read me the card that came with it. "Elizabeth was a great one for forgiving. She would have wanted you to have this. Sleep well, Jason."

Which puzzled me.

"You don't even know what you've done, do you?" said the matron.

"I destroyed a valuable work of art," said I.

But she made no reply.



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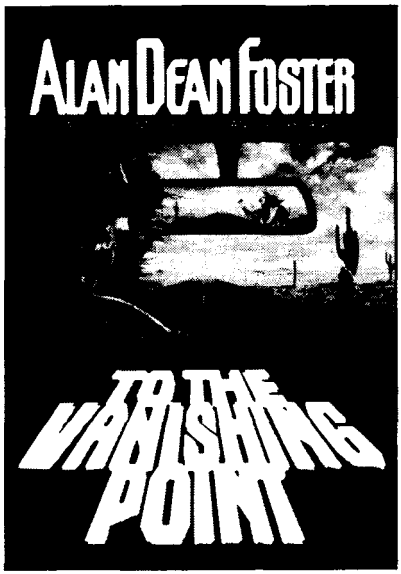

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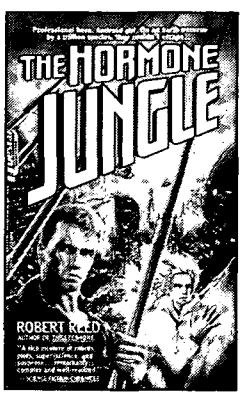

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A WORD FROM

Brian Thomsen

***Vacations are fun, a time for new experiences or the opportunity to reacquaint yourself with someone or something. I always like to travel to different parts of the country, meet new people and make new friends, whether it's for a weekend convention or just a bit of sightseeing. (I have to admit, though, that I've never taken the Hell turnoff outside of Las Vegas, as featured in Alan Dean Foster's* TO THE VANISHING POINT.)**

East Coast, West Coast, Mid-America, countryside and cityscape: seeing them is what vacations are for. If perchance you can't travel in person, there's always a book to transport you there—from Mr. Foster's hellacious California to* THE HORMONE JUNGLE'S *cities of the future.

When you see me around (at work or on vacation), ask me for some tips on good summer reading.

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BOOKS

ALGIS BUDRYS

The Tides of God, Ted Reynolds, Ace, $3.50 (An Ace Special)

. . . and thoughts occasioned by delving into it

IT MIGHT be time to show you more of how my trick is done. Let's take a little walk through Your Reviewer's thought-processes as he assimilates a new thing:

The Tides of God is a first novel, edited by Damon Knight as a continuation of the justly prestigious Specials series created by Terry Carr and prosperous under his direction until his death . . . already a few years ago (!).

The author of an Ace Special walks in company with Ursula LeGuin, R.A. Lafferty, William Gibson and Lucius Shepard, to name only a few. The effect on each new person accepted into such a category must inevitably be profound; it must strongly validate all those years of trying to get it right, and all those weeks of sweating it out while waiting for the letter of acceptance from Ace.

The effect on the series editor must also inevitably be large. I think it must have been easiest on Terry in the earliest days: Here's a good book by an unknown; how do we dress up the package so it stands a chance in the market? (Read: How do I get something I can convince my sales force with? If the special packaging idea actually works at all, then it's going to be plain sailing thereafter.) But it's not so; when the special packaging idea *does* work is when the pressure mounts to have the next book be at least as good as the prior one and the next, and the next, for the mere packaging idea will get old soon if not supported by the content. More: The growing *idea* in the marketplace of the content. The image becomes one of talent and discovery of talent, and each new entry in the series is measured not against the objective quality of its predecessors but against a concept of quality. You can't quantify that, can't parse it, can't point-for-point measure each piece

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of it against analogous pieces in the proposed new candidate for inclusion. You're no longer creating a shelf-full of books; you're carving the frieze on the Parthenon. And you wonder, as you assess each new manuscript, and possibly seek to guide its author into making it better in a way you can both like, whether the purchase you are weighing is indeed a book among many books in your professional career, or a chunk of Parthenon-grade marble.

And how much worse must it be if you're not the Onlie Begettor, and have to edit out of Terry Carr's shoes. But you're Damon Knight, you have broad credentials of your own, and you can handle it. Still....

And so Ted Reynolds, who very probably only wants to be a good writer and be paid and lauded for that, is lumbered, and his book is gone over with sharper instruments than are often used. I suspect some of that formed a component in his reactions to Knight's editorial suggestions, just as it may have affected his choice among possible ways to go. Who knows? It's bootless to speculate on the details of how that worked. But I'll bet it was working.

The editorial situation is not what we're going to talk about any longer here; it flashes through the mind and is gone. Editors of Knight's caliber and experience know enough not to go for the ideal book as they see it; they go for the best book the author is willing and able to attain, and then they sign their names to the completed project, if only figuratively. But what happens — if you're me — and you're reading an Ace Special, is that you do think about what the author was willing and able to attain. Because that tells you something about what's going at the leading edge of this field's evolutions.

You get at this by looking into what the book is about, because that's almost certainly what the author intended all along, and what heartened him in the courageous step of deciding to submit it to Ace Specials rather than some more routine medium.

To explore that, you pick up each segment of the narrative, and fit it into some increasingly plausible concept of why this particular part was shaped this way and situated in this particular relationship to all the other parts.

Here's Reynolds' opening situation:

It's rather far in Earth's future; languages have evolved radically, and the culture shows the sorts of elaborate custom that go with advanced age. These disconnections from our own time may simply be the effect of centuries. There is a hint, however, that a major catastro-

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phe intervened to emphasize the discontinuity.

An advanced alien civilization — the Krocerians — has long been in contact with humanity. It holds all the cards; the superior technology based on a much advanced science, and the hidden agenda. It doesn't have to account to Earth for why it will dribble out some examples of its tech and not others, or even for how some of these things work. It doesn't have to account for anything, but apparently it has, to some extent. Its interest in Earth, and its apparently nonhostile (if arbitrary) behavior toward humanity, is (possibly) motivated by its knowledge that the Krocs and we have a common enemy.

Make that The Enemy. It — or, as some of the humans persist in referring to it, God — has swept over Earth before, devastating it in some way. It went on, out into the Universe; but now it's coming back, and presumably the Krocerians feel equally menaced by this.

In a development that makes Terrestrial hearts sing, the Krocs now give the power elite of Earth a super-starship with which to intercept and kill The Enemy. This will be the first time humans will be allowed to operate anything like this on their own, although its technologies are shared with limited-application Kroc machines that Earth has long been using. Certain key areas of the ship, color-coded green, will be strictly off-limits. The presumption is that devices inside there are not intended for human investigation, and that enforcement of the green code will be immediate and totally terminal. The presumption is these are machine systems; that no Krocs will be aboard.

A crew is chosen and gathered — the best possible captain, the best possible navigator, the best possible gunner, the best possible security chief, etc. — and is trained, and sets out.

Reynolds sets this up by briefly showing each of the crew in his or her normal setting first, and then piecing them together. Technically, this is smart; we get useful slices through various aspects of the culture at the same time the plot keeps advancing. At the same time, we learn something about their attachments — lovers, children, political allies, professional rivals — and the net effect on me is to admire the economical technique being deployed by this new boy; he could be O.K. on our block.

All is not peaches, however. He swaggers a little; uses cute touches — chapter titles encountered are "Good In/Tensions," "Pro/Visions" and "Fore/Cast" — which are clearly bent to the service of making him

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cute rather than communicative with the reader. And his first chapter contains a red herring delivered by the Terran ambassador to the Krocerians, who, it turns out, wants fast transport out of the city not because a bomb is going to go off in it — as Reynolds deliberately makes us believe — but because he's sure it'll smell bad, as Reynolds shows when he's ready for the laugh.

That's another cuteness, and another of two significant instances of lack of restraint. Or perhaps of a purposeful career agenda that includes impressing that particular cadre of SF writers who always tip their hats to each other in the course of doing their nominal job of serving the reader. Perhaps Reynolds doesn't want to just live on our block; he wants to wear a particular set of colors. People who precommit their futures worry me; they may have other unwise tendencies. Or they may just be young . . . but that too is unwise.

As we move on into the book, we begin to notice that Reynolds is not telling us what or who The Enemy is. This may be the application of the Gospel After Heinlein; since everyone onstage knows the answer to that, none of them would talk about it to each other. An excellent precept when writing in the journalistic style that never gives the narrator an overt voice. What Reynolds builds, instead, is a web of interrationships. Each main member of the crew interacts with the others, creating new emotional focii among them or evoking important ones from previous times of interaction. These have to do with themselves, not with their mission, whose raison d'etre at this point is to give them a common overt purpose, which in turn increasingly becomes the arena in which they play out their emotional struggles. And those, of course, are all conditioned by their intense emotional reaction to being on this mortal hunt after The Enemy. In the first quarter of the book, that intensity is still supressed, but they obviously quiver with it, and predictably it will explode at some later point in the narrative.

Toward the very end of this portion, too, the captain's bright prepubescent daughter, wriggling along in the ventilator ducts, exploring her environment as this sort of SF character will, discovers that crossing into the green is apparently harmless. Meanwhile the security chief is shown surreptitiously maintaining an alien stowaway of some sort in his bathtub.

Curtain down on this act; pause for bottled orange juice laced with benzoate of soda and a hasty trip to the mezzanine washroom while organizing one's impressions:

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There is something about the Story Thus Far that reminds one of "The Secret Sharer," *Apocalypse Now*, and *Ship of Fools*.

Now, that is a mode that's beginning to crop up in our field. And I'm not sure how I feel on that topic, regardless of whether Reynolds will eventually prove to have been working toward it or not. I don't see anything wrong with doing a Vietnam film that evokes the mode of Joseph Conrad — though I think *Apocalypse* founders at the point where Coppola decided it was O.K. to lay the entire burden of his film's success on a one-for-one analogy with the text of its inspiration, rather than on the basic consideration that inspired Conrad. I do see problems with taking themes that have worked well — nay, powerfully — in descriptive fiction, and forwarding them into SF, which presumably draws its essential validity from being able to accomplish artistic things that descriptive fiction can not.

I see even more problems if the presence of a descriptive-fiction model is considered a plus. And it is, by some; many serious literary critics who have discussed or do discuss SF treat with it in terms of the descriptive-fiction signatures. That's what they were trained to work with, and what their department chairmen can recognize as sigils of nontrivial effort, and thus respectable and defensible.

That's O.K. up to a point, because it doesn't much matter what the academics do as long as it isn't true enough to affect us deeply. Katherine Porter or whoever is a serious artiste because *Ship of Fools* or whatever is openly modelled on a "classic" theme from whenever, and I don't much care one way or the other; I don't read the book or go to the movie, because much earlier I'd already seen the film of *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*.

Furthermore I once swiped the setup myself for a pseudonymous *Amazing Stories* yarn written around a cover painting with a tight deadline. I found then that from this stance you can get 5000 words into writing the novelette before you have to even start thinking about how it will all resolve, and I'm aware that this facility is available from this structure no matter how serious or unserious your intentions, and whether or not you consciously rely on it for that advantage.*

In a way, this has been with us since the New Wave came out of England and the university effect there. However, lately there's been a sense of this mode pressing into

* *I have chosen not to put footnotes in this column.*

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the field from native U.S. sources, too, with respectable backing. It's likely a product of the fact that young U.S. writers are finding more and more undergraduate venues where SF is treated as a recognizable branch of literature and — precisely — being taught with reference to descriptive-fiction models of what is good literature.

Good literature it is. SF descended from Campbellian "modern" SF — which is, still, what U.S. SF is in large part — could use practitioners well acquainted with descriptive-fiction techniques and technical standards. But descriptive-fiction themes taken up whole, and unmodified by SF's unique capabilities, may well eventually prove to be tapeworms.

And from that brink, we plunge back into *The Tides of God.*

Well, at the very beginning of Part Two, we get a plant by Reynolds that tells us The Enemy causes cyclic ages of irrationality that have interrupted human progress since at least the beginnings of history, and we get a strong hint of upcoming physical disaster to *The Hound,* which is what the humans have named the ship. Whether that actually fits with the hypothesizing done above or not, it seems to, and so we tread even more ambivalently toward learning just what kind of a book this rather good piece of writing is. We already know it isn't great, but then, in fact there is no Ace Special that's unequivocally great except in reputation, though *The Left Hand of Darkness* would do it if the first few pages were re-written, and certainly is head and shoulders above many other SF works called great.

But at that point Reynolds abandons classical Heinlein, and for many pages the characters get together repeatedly for the sole purpose of discussing the enemy, and religious matters. Reynolds conceals the baldness of his purpose under little side-venturings into sex, sexual mores, and SF clothing such as a bandeau that turns from pure white to bright red as its wearer becomes sexually desirous. This is poor technique because it doesn't in fact mitigate the realization that maid-and-butler dialogue is occurring, that it could have occurred at any time, that the author is visibly just paying out a string to the reader from a store of previous stacked "surprises," and, perhaps, that the foregoing portion, much more deftly worked and full of fetching enigma, may have been primarily directed at another audience. That is, it might be the portion that got the contract, whereas what we are encountering now is what was written after the author

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had successfully hooked the publisher; the part he is doing for us.

Now, that's an invidious thought. But it may be true nevertheless, and it could be accurate whether Reynolds has consciously gone into that viewpoint or is simply displaying signs of a natural reaction to having planted the flag atop the mountain at last. (But the responsibility for stewarding one's capabilities and honoring one's art always remains with the author, per standard contract with the Muse.)

At about this point, too, the captain's precocious daughter, attempting to find her pet, Slinky, in the green portion, helps us to discover that there are other Krocerians aboard ship besides the one in the security chief's bathroom. This occurs shortly after she begins hearing the voice of God in bold capital letters.

You see what is happening to my attitude? Reynolds hasn't changed, his text hasn't changed, but my picture of both has been affected by what I've found in the text, and I'm beginning to get flippant with this stranger who, I still rather suspect, had serious workhabits and an untrivial intention.

As it happens, the book never gets better than this. The intended theme appears to have overwhelmed the author, and questions that Conrad — and Porter — addressed to powerful effect are trivialized into a concatenation of science-fictioney cliches, as sharply distinguished from speculative fiction, the literature. Jump-me-now bandeaus aren't going to save a story that eventually cops out on its own theme, and serious scholars can't be blamed for pointing to all the furniture and costumes in their essential disarray, and concluding that this work is obviously SF, and SF obviously can't handle anything important.

This is too bad. As might be gathered from Part One, Reynolds *is* a talent, does, already, at this early point have an above-average command of language and narrative technique, and could, quite clearly, be very good someday. Possibly, someday soon; talent makes quantum-leaps all the time, especially in the debut stages of an artist's development.

I do this kind of thing — pretty much exactly this kind of thing — with every book I take up with you. That is how I do my trick. *Coqio, ergo sum fun, hey, Kid?* I wish Ted Reynolds well, but I wish us better.

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Books to Look For

BY ORSON SCOTT CARD

Ivory, Mike Resnick (TOR, cloth, 374 pp, $17.95)

MIKE RESNICK is almost single-handedly keeping the romantic tradition alive in space.

A couple of years ago, Mike Resnick's *Santiago* took us both forward and back in time: forward to a galaxy-spanning civilization where both the dreamers and dregs of society are drawn to two frontiers, one toward the galactic rim, the other core-ward of the settled worlds; and at the same time, back to the grand old tradition of pulp adventure-and-wonder stories. Not space opera, not "Doc" Smith, because Resnick doesn't try to dazzle us with world-hopping starships and bombs that can blow up planets. Rather he reaches for an even older and truer tradition, like stories of A. Merritt and H. Rider Haggard, where heros really are touched by a divine spark, where legends reach mythic proportion while the participants in the story are still alive.

I love this stuff, and nobody's doing it better today than Mike Resnick.

Ivory is a cycle of stories — of ambition and greed, of weakness and tenderness, of love and betrayal — all bound up with the two massive tusks of the Kilimanjaro Elephant, which are passed from owner to owner through thousands of years of human history until at last a member of the Maasai tribe restores the tusks to their proper resting place on the shoulder of the great African mountain. We learn of these stories as they are uncovered by a computer detective, searching the archives of the galaxy in order to satisfy his mysterious client, the last of the Maasai.

Of course this episodic structure can be a barrier — just as you get fascinated with one set of characters, the story is over and you have to start again. But this is not a mere collection of tales; they work together to give you a sense of the vastness of time and space — and, more important, the changeability and changelessness, the transparency and mystery of human beings.

The Quick, Burt Cole (Morrow, cloth, 307pp, $17.95)

The cover blurb on *The Quick* asserts that it will "remind readers of M.J. Engh's *Arslan* and Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*." Right.

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The way that a hamburger reminds me of my wife's most excellent eye-of-round roast. They've both got beef in 'em, don't they?

But the author isn't responsible for the cover blurbs — those are written by people who want to sell these copies of this book this week, not people with an eye to helping the author's career. Overpromising hurts the author in the long run, as readers learn to associate disappointment with the author's name.

The Quick is not a monumental work. It's merely a promising work — but that ain't bad, as long as you don't expect more.

Burt Cole has written military and adventure novels, and that experience shows up in *The Quick* — this guy knows his guns, and he believes in the super-soldier mystique. He also has the super-soldier's contempt for the chain of command. But in *The Quick* he subverts his own genre in interesting ways, and even though the ending left me thinking, "Is that all?" It was sure a lot of fun getting there.

The best part of the book is the beginning, where we live for a time with the landless Bajau people, who live in tiny boats, sailing, fishing, trading from island to island in the western Pacific. We meet Tcham An, an American-born pirate in the Philippines, whose brilliance and ruthlessness are, at first, believable. And throughout the book there are flashes of that same brilliance — Cole *can* create characters who come alive in the reader's memory.

Unfortunately, the story is marred and then destroyed by hopelessly unbelievable political and social situations. This isn't the first sf novel to reveal the author's complete ignorance of the way power and community work on every level — but just because most sf writers share the same abysmal flaw doesn't make it any less a flaw. By the end, when the author needs us to be right with him, it's hard to keep from laughing at the impossible childishness of it. I mean, this stuff is as silly as the secret revolution in Heinlein's *Revolt in 2100* (or whatever year it was).

On my tote board, then, the metaphysical story works, the military story works, the allegory of national self-inflicted torture works. Only the science fiction story fails as a plausible future. Three out of four ain't bad. And since it's compulsively readable (except for the misbegotten "dream" chapter near the end), it works well enough for me to recommend it as a pleasureable read with some very fine parts.

Besides, if you've been reading science fiction for very long, you've no doubt been inoculated against silliness already.

* * *

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City: Rediscovering The Center, William H. Whyte (Doubleday, cloth, $24.95)

You think you know what it's like to live in a city? Unpleasantly crowded, hurried, dirty — right? William Whyte led an anthropological expedition into that most dangerous jungle, Downtown, and came back to report that it's a wonderful place to live and work and hang around.

This book isn't science fiction. But it does what much science fiction attempts to do — it takes us into an alien world and helps us understand how it works. The fact that the alien world is one you've visited often doesn't change a thing — you'll see it with new eyes before you're through. And there are so many wonderful stories and vignettes along the way — Whyte *is* a storyteller, as the best cultural anthropologists tend to be — that it gives a pleasure not unlike what we get from the best science fiction.

There Are Doors Gene Wolfe, (Tor, cloth, 313pp, $17.95)

I got Gene Wolfe's new novel in galleys, and meant to read it right away. Then the actual book arrived, and it, too, sat for two months before I finally picked it up. I couldn't understand my own reluctance, since Wolfe is, in my estimation, one of the finest living American writers. Finally I realized that I was avoiding it because of its contemporary setting. It reminded me too much of Wolfe's comic novel *Free Live Free.*

I liked *Free Live Free.* If anyone else had written it, I probably wouldn't have been disappointed. But Wolfe's other novels have all been so substantial that reading *Free Live Free* felt like chewing on air. And that's what I expected of *There Are Doors.*

OK, so now I'm wearing my dunce cap and sitting in the corner. *There Are Doors* is different from anything else Wolfe has ever done. This is a *romance*, a *love story*. The narrator's lover leaves him a note, in which she breaks off their relationship — and tells him to watch out for "doors." After being so close to her, he's in danger of accidentally passing through a doorway into another world. *Her* world, which is very much like ours except for a little change —after a man has sexual intercourse, he dies; his mate's body stores and uses up his sperm throughout the rest of her life.

Wolfe does what good science fiction writers do: He carefully works out the way our society would be different if that little change were made. But that's far from being what the story is about. On one level, the story is about madness and sanity.

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We learn early on that the narrator has been a mental patient; immediately we begin to wonder if anything we've seen through his eyes is reliable. On another level, the story is about devotion — the devotion of a fellow door-crasher named North to his gung-ho patriotic ideals, for instance; the devotion of the narrator to his lost love; the devotion of a robot doll to its owner. On still another level, Wolfe is showing us how we create ourselves in terms of other people; the narrator scarcely can be said to have existed before his love for Lara gave him a soul.

It's nice to read science fiction that has as many echoes of Pasternak as of Asimov. But the overall tone here is romantic, not literary — and if you've been paying attention to anything I've said here over the past couple of years, you know I mean that as fervent praise. In my experience, only Robert Charles Wilson has been able to create this same kind of dreamy passion.

Wolfe is still Wolfe, of course: He does not deign to nudge us and let us know which details are important. If he says something once, however obliquely, we are expected to notice and remember. The result is that the story can be quite confusing early on, until you realize that the tiny piece of evidence on page 7 is all you're ever going to get on the question of the narrator's previous mental illness until near the very end of the book. But don't let that early confusion worry you. Wolfe does not let a single word of his narrative go to waste. *Every* detail matters, somewhere along the line; *every* question will be answered.

Don't let Gene Wolfe's reputation as a "literary" writer put you off. He has earned that reputation the honest way — not by making his audience feel stupid, not by disdaining the notion of entertainment, but rather by telling good stories beautifully. While *There Are Doors* does not attempt to plow up the secrets of the cosmos in the mode of Wolfe's more operatic works, it may well be Wolfe's most perfect story.

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It's all very well for princesses to go around kissing frogs, but what about the frog? Elizabeth Moon returns to F&SF with a unique tale that reveals the other side of the story.

The Happy Frog

By Elizabeth Moon

ONCE THERE WAS a frog who lived in a large pond at the edge of the forest. His broad back was patterned with dapples of gold and black on shining green; his belly was smooth and silvery. Long legs thrust him from bank to lily pad, and from lily pad far into the clear green waters of the pond. Great eyes like crinkled gold foil, the pupils black wells, showed him a world fit for such a prince of frogs: small creatures of the air to catch with a flip of his long and agile tongue, small creatures of the water to gulp and swallow when he swam. Broad lily pads and half-sunk logs to sun on; shady shallows where a frog could bask safely, only eyes showing above the water's skin. He had survived the dangers of his youth: the supple snakes who feasted on young frogs; the herons who hunted the water's edge and speared his kin with savage beaks; the great fish at the pond's bottom, who would take frog when he could not find a smaller cousin; the quick-pawed mink and otter. Now, grown broad and bitter, long hind toes clawed, he sent his richly patterned song throbbing into

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the evening air. Here, here, here, he sang. Great frogs, spotted frogs, here, here, here.

In all this idyll, only one recurring problem. Far away, some fool (as the frog would have said it) sang a tale, and in that tale a witch's curse shriveled a prince into a frog. Eventually a princess kissed the frog, broke the enchantment, and freed the prince. A story, the frog would have said, of surpassing foolishment, the sort of thing one might expect of idle humans who knew nothing of frogs but their croaking in the night. Ridiculous, foolish story, and (above all) absolutely and completely impossible.

But no one asked the frog's opinion. The story spread. In a realm where eligible princes were few, and princesses many, a fashion arose of searching for such enchanted mortals. Frog hunts, with all the panoply of royal venery: the huntsman, the beaters, the music, the companions of the chase, ribbons and laces and little frog-stickers bound in silver. The castle ponds were soon depleted, for of course it quickly became obvious that to release an unenchanted frog meant chancing a catch of the same unenchanted frog on the next hunt. Unenchanted frogs became frog legs, a new and fashionable item at the feasts that followed the hunt (although, two years before, frog legs had been a peasant dish, too coarse to be mentioned by persons of quality). If one could not have a verifiable disenchanted prince bowing over one's hand, one could devour the faithless (and luckless) frogs so unwise as to be mere frogs, and slow enough to be caught.

When the castle ponds yielded only small, furtive brown frogs (obviously not princes: no one would kiss such a thing lest it be an enchanted servant), the princesses moved on to farm ponds. Soon the farm ponds were all empty of great, green, speckled, or spotted frogs suitable as enchanted princes, and the search spread to woods and pastures and distant lakes.

The first princess found the pond by the forest on a hot summer afternoon when the great frog was lying in shady water, eyes nearly shut, half-thinking about letting the mosquito hovering in front of him live another day. A loud thumping downhill opened his eyes wide. Horns brayed, dogs barked, and human voices chattered through it all. His eyes flipped open, he gulped a great gulp of air, and slid underwater, swimming with long, easy kicks to the clump of cattails that ran out into the pond. From there, screened by the shaking shadows, he could watch unseen.

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What he saw was appalling. First the dogs, dashing to the water's edge and slavering into the pond, splashing and yelping with glee. Then the huntsman, all in green with a red feather in his peaked cap, and the beaters in russet, with green feathers. Then the musicians, on spotted ponies, beating their drums and blowing their horns with more energy than harmony. And then the bevy of ladies, their sweaty horses decked with ribbons and bells and bits of braided yarn, and leaning toward the water eagerly. A few knights as escort, including one old graybeard, grim and watchful, who clearly thought the entire expedition was a mistake. And behind, on foot, gasping and struggling, the servants bearing the picnic.

All — dogs, horses, huntsman and beaters, ladies, knights, and servants — came to the water. Horses and ponies churned the grassy verge into a mucky mess; the frog could smell it all the way across the pond. Servants dipped cans into the pond (carefully away from the horse-churned shallows); a bright taste of copper made the frog's mouth ache. The huntsman and his beaters knelt to drink from the pond's edge, as did the servants; the ladies and knights drank water from the copper cans, mixed with wine in tankards the servants unpacked along with all the other paraphernalia of a royal picnic.

As bad as the roiling of the water was the noise. Splashing, crashing, thudding of hooves, loud voices, clinking tankards and knives and plates. The frog blinked, wondering what they could possibly be up to. When they had finished eating, tossing their scraps messily into the pond itself, he found out.

Among his many relatives, some hardly smaller than himself had survived the snakes, the herons, the old great fish in the bottom of the pond. One of these, more curious than wise, bobbed up scarce a single leap's length from shore to examine a crust of bread. The ladies shrieked. "A frog! Bigger than the one at Miller's pond! Bigger even than the one at Appleford. Surely this is a prince!" Then the dogs barked, and the huntsman blew his whistle, and the beaters rolled up their russet trousers, picked up strange fan-shape objects, and waded into the water. His relative, the younger frog, had already dived, making for the water lilies.

Two lines of beaters entered the water, while the ladies stood on dry grass and waved encouragement. Slowly, they dipped their mysterious handfuls into the pond, slowly drew them along, and lifted them with a

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quick twist of the wrist — and there, in one, the frog saw a fish struggling, a small fish of silver streaked with red and yellow. The frog gulped; he was himself particularly fond of small silver fish streaked red and yellow, and hated to see that delicacy slide into another throat. But the beater tossed the fish aside, into the water, and again stroked the water with what the frog now realized was a catcher of some sort.

As the beaters worked along the shallow water, a young frog panicked, and leaped from bottom mud to shore in one wild, splashing arc. At once the beaters flung themselves after it, great floundering creatures that they were, and the knights on shore grabbed for it. Finally someone — the frog could not see who — made the catch, and held the struggling creature aloft. "A frog, a frog!" cried the ladies. "A kissable frog!" And then they drew back into a crescent, and allowed one of their number the center. The frog could see nothing different about her except the shining metal circlet on her head. His young relative gaped, terrified, in the strong hands that held him aloft; that lady then came forward and carefully, almost studiously, put her lips to the frog's head.

From the frog's point of view, what followed was more of the same incomprehensible nonsense. A cry of dismay from the ladies; covert grins from the servants, knights, beaters. A look of disgust on the face of the lady who had kissed the frog, and then a look of calculation. She reached out her hand. The huntsman drew from a forest-green sheath a little silver frog-sticker. [The frog stiffened in outrage and astonishment: a *frog* hunt? Was that what this was about? But only peasants hunted frogs, and they never had time to come this far; their own ponds held all the frogs they needed.] While the great frog watched, disgusted and fascinated all at once, his young relative was stretched on the sorry, trodden ground, and pierced by the pretty weapon. His legs were torn off and dropped in a sack, and his tattered remains thrown into the center of the pool, where their rich smell brought the great fish up from the bottom, his long tail stirring and stirring the water as he climbed almost to sunlight.

This would have been bad enough, an afternoon to blight a whole moon of summer, but it was not over yet. The beaters returned to the water, once more sweeping back and forth with their nets. Again a young frog broke, this time leaping and swimming frantically for safe water, but so disoriented by the foot-churned mud that he zigged stupidly back toward them. The beaters thrashed after, flailing at the water with their

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nets. Another fish was caught, thrown back. A net's edge hit one young turtle, shattering its shell. And in the pond's deep center, the old fish circled, alarmed and wary both.

The great frog could stand it no longer. He swam in three long kicks from the cattails to the lily pads, slid himself onto the largest of these, and CROAKED. "Stop!" screamed the princess. The beaters had already stopped, recognizing that croak for what it was, the croak of a large and vigorous frog in the prime of life. "Where?" asked the huntsman. The frog croaked again, louder, and saw all those pale and foolish human faces turn to him. "There!" yelled and shouted and cried and screamed the humans. "It must be a prince," said one lady. The younger frog, forgotten, swam in jerky strokes to the lilies, and hauled himself gasping onto a smaller pad. "Forget the little one," said the huntsman. "It's the big one we want."

But it was the big one they could not get, not then. For those lily pads grew on the far side of the pond, and between the beaters and the lilies were many yards of deep green water. They waded out, deeper and deeper, and realized they could not wade across. Cursing, they went around. The frog and his relatives retired to the deep center, risking the old fish (who had gone into a sulk and returned to the bottom to put his nose in the cold spring that fed the pond). And although the huntsman threw rocks at them, and his beaters thrashed the shallow water near the shore, they were safe. At last, as the sun declined, the whole party withdrew: hunters, beaters, dogs, servants, ladies, knights, ponies, horses, and all. It was over.

Until, that is, the next fine day. This time the frog knew what to expect when he heard the drums, the horns, the horses' hooves and dogs' barks, and all those discordant human voices. It had been talked about. All the frogs swam at once to the center of the pool, and hung in the water, eyes bulging up like so many floating eggs. The great frog kicked, and they croaked derisively, in unison.

Unfortunately, it seemed the humans were neither amused nor deterred. Idly, the frogs watched them unpack the picnic, this time carried in long wooden boxes instead of baskets. Idly, they watched as servants dragged the boxes to the water's edge. Idly, they watched the beaters roll up their russet trousers and wade into the water carrying those selfsame nets.

And then the boxes moved on the water, two beaters in each box, sliding along the surface like large but very stiff water snakes. The frogs

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were so amazed they almost forgot to dive, and the nets caught one. The others scattered, frantic, beneath the surface, feeling the water roil around them as the nets reached and waved. They came up all around the pond, breathless with astonishment and terror, and watched as the box bore their comrade to the same fate: a kiss, and then death, and then dismemberment. Only the terror, with its instinctive power, saved them from the beaters who were *not* in the boats, who had crept around the pond to wade in and scoop up those who fled from deep water. They dived again, swam four or five wild kicks, and surfaced. Again the beaters in the floating boxes dipped and swayed; again a single victim rose dripping and forlorn from the water.

Even so, four men in two small boats on a large pond are no match for free frogs, and half a dozen or so on the shore can cover only a part of the shallow water. Now that they understood, the frogs stayed in that middle zone — too deep for wading, but out of reach of the boatmen. Back and forth the men rowed, and back and forth the men on shore waded, and up and down and back and forth the frogs swam. It was, in a perverted sort of way, *fun* to dodge beneath the boats, feel the pressure wave of water as the net stroked nearby, slip aside into safe darkness, then rise (but carefully, watching for the shadow of the boat, and carefully, watching for the rising gleam of the great fish) to put narrow nostrils and bulging eyes out of water. If the humans' backs were turned, then a quick swelling of the throat, a quick croak and quicker dive. Not natural fun, like catching a juicy moth or tasty fish fly, but fun.

Eventually, before dark, the humans tired of this, too, and they all went home. The great fish had eaten the sorry remains of three young frogs and retired to his cool haven, and the rest were feasting on evening flies. They were safe.

BUT THE next night, men came with torches, great flaring stalks of fire set on iron posts all around the pond. Musicians played tinkling tunes under the forest edge, while the ladies lounged on carpets spread on the grass. The frogs could hardly see even this much. Glittering light washed over them, blinding even underwater with its flickering, unsteady gleam. Again a boat moved out — only one, a black shadow darker than the night sky — and this time lamps hung low along its sides, and from a pole before it. The frogs swam jerkily around the pond, uncertain.

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Then a harsh croak, most unfroglike, sent them all to the bottom. A cormorant! Minute after minute they lay, colder than the cold water with fear. But air-hunger had its way with them, and slowly, carefully, one by one they drifted toward the surface. Hardly had the first wave taken a cautious breath, noses barely out into the air, when a black shadow thrust among them, a gaping beak hungry for prey. And one luckless frog was caught, brought to the surface by that captive bird with a ring around its neck, and a long cord tied to one bony leg. Hands plucked the frog from that beak, bore it to the princess . . . and to the usual doom, save that the mangled remains were tossed into the boat, to feed the cormorant when its night's work was done. Meanwhile the cormorant dove again, caught another frog, to repeat the cycle.

How this might have ended, none of them could imagine, but the light and furor drew the old fish. Up he came, slow and easy as a rising current of water, uneven light making him waver like a vision in blowing mist. His long snout opened, tasted the water, the frogs' terror, the swirl and plunge of some hunter in territory he considered his own. In one dive the bird raked the fish's side with its beak . . . and in that same dive the fish took the bird, and dove back to the pond's bottom, jaws clenched around a hot, feathered prize such as he had not enjoyed since the ducks quit nesting there.

The beaters yanked on the bird's leg-cord, jarring the old fish's descent; in memory of old wounds and battles, the fish let go briefly, then followed the dead bird up, taking chunks and feathers from it until the beaters saw that mysterious shape rising out of darkness and panicked, stabbing with net handles. The fish rolled, swerved beneath the boat — he had no love for boats — and lay there, concealed. A net handle poked his side; he humped, and the boat bobbed. The beaters cried out, dropped their nets. The fish considered the cormorant corpse, now hanging temptingly from the boat near his nose. But hooks . . . he remembered hooks, all too well, and the cormorant smelled of metal, from the ring on its neck. The fish bumped the boat again, harder, then took the cormorant's loose wing in his mouth and wagged it back and forth. Above him, in the boat, the beaters screamed. From the angles the light made in the water, the great fish looked even greater, a monster of legend, all iron scales and fins of steel and crystal. On shore, one of the knights threw a light lance that scraped the fish's tail. The beaters cried out again, in warning, but it

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was too late. The fish had mastered this pond, and had no mind to have humans invade it; certainly not in the peaceful night, when he felt most secure. With a lunge and a plunge, he rocked the light boat, then drenched it as he breached beside it. Another plunge, a shove on the side that suddenly seemed higher, and the boat went over, spilling two terrified humans into the water. The fish sank, spiraling down to his favorite resting place, and ignored the chaos above. Eventually the water quieted, and did not, he was sorry to notice, smell of drowned humans. He enjoyed the bits of dead frog that had fallen out when the boat went over.

Although the night frogging party left when the two beaters finally floundered to shore, it was clear to everyone that the humans were not going to give up. The resident water snakes moved downstream "for the duration," as they put it. Dogs, they said vaguely, making sinusoidal patterns without going anywhere, and then suddenly going, without appearing to move. The remaining heron packed his long, crooked neck into a tight wedge and flew away. For some days, nothing happened. The great frog relaxed enough to send his booming call out into the night: Here, here, here . . . here. But no one came, no one he wanted to speak to. Their reputation had spread. No one was going to move to that pond, until the humans gave up on it. The great frog began to realize that he was getting sidelong looks, even from his own kin . . . his own offspring.

When the next trouble came, it was worse than anyone had imagined, The noisy procession seemed familiar, but what was this rumbling thing on wheels (they knew about wheels: mills had wheels) pulled by two hefty, hairy-ankled horses? A box, set down heavily at the foot of the pond, just where it spilled into a stream. A long snakelike thing, trailed out (a HUGE snake, the frogs noted nervously) into the pond water. A shorter, snakelike thing ran down the stream a little. Beaters by the shore, their trousers rolled, with nets — more than ever before. And two huge, sweating peasants, who began to haul and shove on sticks coming from the box, up and down, up and down, up and down.

It made a horrible noise, obscene: slobbering and sucking and groaning all at once. Worse than that, as the noise went on, the water near the mysterious snake turned brown, as mud and slime and fluff off the bottom rose, churned, and slid inexorably toward the end of the . . . hose. Thump and thud, slurp and slobber, the two-man fire pump sucked water from the pond. It was then early morning; the princess and her ladies had not

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arrived. But by midmorning, all the creatures in the pond knew what was happening. The pond was being killed, sucked away by that horrible box and those sweating peasants, who worked in shifts, without pausing. Inch by inch the water went down, and the beaters moved a little farther into the water, churning up yet more mud, blinding those creatures with eyes, and smothering those who depended on smell. Already five crayfish holes were exposed to the drying sun.

The pump went on, its throbbing palpable to the old fish down by the spring. Exquisitely sensitive to the water's messages, he felt the lessening pressure, knew the spring was pouring in less than the pump was taking out. Worse was to come. Another pump arrived by noon. The pond shrank visibly. Bundles of frog spawn rose into the light and air, to die. Tadpoles were stranded in old footprints, trodden underfoot by the beaters.

In the cool afternoon the princess came to see what progress had been made, came with a pavilion in which to spend the night, if necessary. By then the frog had made his decision. Freedom was not worth the loss of all his progeny, the destruction of his lifelong home. He did not wish to die, but he would let the human touch her lips to his, and trust in his strength and speed to escape. So when the princess strolled down to the grass verge, now some feet from the water, he rose to the surface and croaked. She pointed. He swam nearer, arrowing straight for her feet. A net swooped at him, but her command halted it. Behind her, her ladies murmured, awed. Surely so bold a frog . . . surely so large and handsome a frog (for a frog) . . . surely so *unnatural* a frog must be a prince.

At the water's edge he hopped onto stinking mud, as lightly as he might, and then to her feet. Looking up, he croaked again. The princess crouched down and offered her hand. The frog waddled onto it; she lifted him to her face and, with a frown of concentration, touched her lips (hot, dry, unpleasant lips) to his cool, slick ones.

And of course he remained what he had always been: a large, handsome spotted frog, a prince among frogs, but entirely batrachian. Furious, for having been so visibly convinced, so publicly tooled, she clutched at him, eager for sacrifice, but he thrust his long, sharp, breeding claws into her wrist. With a shriek, she dropped him, and he leaped instantly as far as he could. Feet, sticks, and nets thrashed around him. He leaped again, wildly, anywhere, as deaths pursued. Screams from the princess, from the other ladies, bellows and curses from the men. But at last he leaped straight over

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a net, high and clean, and landed with a splash in water just deep enough for swimming.

She would have had the pool drained to kill him, the frog who so humiliated her, but the knights prevailed. If that frog, the biggest anyone had seen, was not a prince, then no lesser frog in that pond would be, and she could not reasonably waste the labor of so many peasants with the harvest in progress. Forget the stupid thing, the knights said. . . . One of them crooned, stroking her disordered hair. We need the fire pumps back in the castle, said another. And as it was coming onto sunset, and she had no wish to spend the night here, in sight of so insolent a frog, she let herself be persuaded. The ladies rode off first, with light chatter and edged merriment, escorted as always by the knights; then the beaters muddy to the knees, grinning slyly at each other; and finally the peasants, cursing quietly about the time lost from harvest, the labor it would take to drag these miserable, stinking fire pumps where they should have never been taken from, did the king have the sense the gods gave — they paused, spat severally into the pond, and ended — frogs. Damned frogs, and they'd be switched if they ever ate another frog leg.

By the end of summer, the spring had managed to refill the pond, although the lost frog spawn and tadpoles couldn't be replaced. The water snakes had moved back upstream. And it all seemed to be over.

It was on a hot, dry, dusty day at the ragged end of summer, when the pond's skin was dusted with goldenrod pollen, that the next princess arrived. No procession this time: a tired donkey, whose red saddle had faded from exposure and no proper oiling. And on the donkey, a sad-faced young woman who hardly merited the title of lady . . . not after the royalty the frog had seen that summer. Her dress had once been green, but was weatherworn into blotches of brown and dull yellow. Bright metal on her head, yes, but no finery, no ribbons, laces, jingling bells . . . no jewels. No servants to carry her picnic luncheon, no knights riding escort, no ladies-in-waiting, no musicians, no carpet and cushions, no pavilion, nothing. Frogs have no conception of human beauty; the girl might have been ugly, plain, or pretty — to him, she was a human, a palefaced, huge, smelly creature about to cause trouble. The frog broke off his musings when the donkey came to water. The princess — if indeed that bright metal meant a princess — had thrown herself carelessly on her stomach at the water's edge, alongside the donkey, and was resting her cheek on the water, as if her skin burned.

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The frogs stayed in the middle of the pond. Who could know what tricks she might have? She sighed, pushed herself up, looked around, and burst into tears. The donkey backed up a few steps and brayed. Still crying (a disgusting sound, the frog thought), she tended to the donkey, unfastening the girth of the red saddle, pulling off the bridle. The donkey shook itself, doglike, and ambled off to find a good place to roll. The girl came back to the water's edge, sank down in the nest of her shabby skirts, and cried.

Terror lasts only so long. When the girl didn't move, but continued to sob, the frogs returned, one by one and cautiously, to their own activities. Late flies, careless moths, butterflies worn to tatters by a summer's life: all were prey, delicious to frogs fattening for winter endurance. The great frog slid onto the largest lily pad and watched. No beaters crept out of the woods . . . no danger at all. Only the girl, whose sobs gradually died away as she fell asleep in the last light.

Dust thickened, and a chill mist formed over the pond, warning of autumn to come. The frog swam stealthily through the warm surface water, closer and closer to the sleeping girl. He could hear the donkey ripping into a berry vine under the forest edge, hear the tiny patter of night-hunters' paws in leaf mold now crisping in the turning year. And he could hear the deep, quiet breathing of the girl, the rustle of her clothes as she shivered in the mist.

His feet found mud, and he crouched. Her hand was only a leap away, just on dry ground. The frog considered. So far she had not been much trouble, but experience was against her. It had worked before: the best plan was to let her put her lips on him quickly, and then go away. He was sure he could escape a single human with no trouble at all. Behind him, one of his relatives offered a tentative croak. He let his own throat swell into a glorious round, so big he could see it himself, and expelled a powerful reply. Here, he said. Here, here, here. Frog . . . frog, frog, frog. I know what I'm doing, he said, bracing his hind legs. He had heard her indrawn breath as she woke in chill, damp darkness with a booming bullfrog near at hand, and prepared to leap if necessary.

But her voice came on a warm gust, somewhat less smelly than the other princess's breath. "A frog!" she said. It was the same, the frog thought, as the other one. For some reason, they wanted to kiss a frog. It made no sense at all. He didn't want to kiss a human. . . . In fact, frogs

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do not kiss frogs. But he felt that he understood the routine now. He croaked more softly, and hopped forward. As he hoped, she stayed where she was, lying down with her face near the ground. It was not *quite* dark, even with mist, for the starlight suffused it. He could see the white blur of her face, and finding her mouth was no problem, with that warm, odorous breeze coming from it. And she saw him, for she said again, "A frog! A huge frog! Then maybe it's true . . . all that about enchantment. . . ." This the frog did not understand, but he waddled forward anyway. She held still, poised. He waited, one long moment after another. Why didn't she . . . ? With the merest suggestion of a sigh, the frog stretched slightly and touched his cool, damp mouth to hers.

For the frog, who had never been told about enchantments, it was a startling experience. Under his lips, her soft, warm, human-smelling lips turned cool and rubbery. Her chin shrank away, her face receded, and two huge, luminous green eyes rose scarcely a head length from his own. And she hopped out of the tangle of her discarded clothes, a sleek green, black-and-gold-spotted frog, whose breath was clean and froglike, whose long legs folded and unfolded in a great leap that ended in a splash.

It did not take him long to follow, and though he never completely understood what it had been about, they lived happily ever after in that pond by the forest edge. As for the minstrel who had so garbled the story he heard from the naiad who lived in the witch's well, he lived long and happily on his own version, although none of the princesses who went frog hunting ever found a prince in a pond. What had a frog-maid done, to be cursed into the shape of a human princess all those years? That's another tale altogether.

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Here is something truly different: a tale about a young man from the 2320's who travels in time in pursuit of a pop singer with a wonderful name. Mr. Wagar says it bears out the thesis that life imitates art, and usually not very well.

THE HUSBAND OF PUMA ST. LOUIS DESIRE

By W. Warren Wagar

THE TROUBLE WITH NTSU Mpakati was indelible shyness. He had emerged wet and gleaming from his birth-cylinder with defective genes in the twelfth and twentieth chromosomes, in just the right configuration to produce Obasanjo's syndrome. It is a subtle ill, evading detection until early adolescence. No microsurgeon has ever repaired the damage it inflicts on the central nervous system. Ibrahim bin Abubakar once claimed success with grafts of cultured brain tissue, but who can believe him? Who has replicated his results?

So Ntsu Mpakati was shy. Quite shy. At the age of fourteen, he stroked the velvety black skin of a girl's thigh and was told to stop.

He stopped. He could never understand why she lost interest. At the

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age of fifteen, he was elected Spokesmind of his college class and had to make a pretty speech from memory. He stood before a thousand pairs of shining eyes and stammered, "Collegians believe in the sanctity of toil. Collegians believe in the honor of sacrifice. Collegians believe . . . collegians believe in the . . . sanctity of toil . . . as I said before."

The thousand eyes blinked. Then Ntsu suddenly remembered the whole speech and finished it without further flaw, but his face burned, and later, at lunch, he could not eat.

When he grew up, Ntsu became a poet. It was odd, but if called upon to recite at festivals, he read his lines splendidly, with a voice that never broke. Yet as soon as he stepped down from the poet's dais, he scurried away and could not bring himself to greet anyone he did not already know.

Only those well acquainted with Obasanjo's syndrome understood his problem. Since there was no cure, they never discussed it with Ntsu. What was the use?

In the year 2328, when most of the world was rejoicing in the safe return from Sirius of the cosmonauts of the *Bishop Tutu IX* expedition, Ntsu fell deeply in love.

Persons in his condition normally fall deeply in love, when they fall at all. They are soon mired in fathomless despair, because no one appreciates being the object of their haunted passion. Most patients recover, and live to love — and lose — again. For a few the despair has darker consequences.

What caught Ntsu's eye was a framed poster in the World Exhibition of Media Arts in Harare.

Someone had crafted a magnificent baroque frame in gilded mahogany, richly carved with dancing girls and severed heads, serpents and apples, Cleopatras and barges, all the riotous imagery of feminine evil; and inside the frame appeared a cheap mass-produced portrait of Puma St. Louis Desire, in a white cardigan with a necklace of great rosy rhinestones and bracelets and earrings to match.

In its earlier adventures, the icon had been folded over twice, causing sharp vertical and horizontal creases still visible despite the framer's best efforts. It was the kind of poster that Old-Time vendors of recordings once offered their customers as an incentive to buy. The customer dispatched a coupon that came with the tape or the disc, adding money for "postage and handling," and six weeks later the flimsy folly arrived in a cardboard tube, "personally autographed" by the star.

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Needless to say, such posters, replete with autographs, rolled off the presses in those days by the hundreds of thousands with no help from any star.

Ntsu knew just where to look. In the lower right-hand corner of the poster in the mahogany frame, scrawled in a casually graceful hand, stood the tender inscription: "With all my love, Puma."

He looked at the words, and then again at the face.

"With all my love," he murmured.

Puma St. Louis Desire occupies only a small niche in the history of Old-Time pop culture. She bloomed briefly in the late 1990s, and by 2005 was already a dry and faded flower.

But for Ntsu, she held a vast, indefinable charm. On her slightly parted lips, she wore a wistful smile; and in her moist gray eyes, he saw a hint of sadness, of suffering and disappointment, that aroused all his protective instincts.

He resolved on the spot to learn everything he could learn about the life and times of Puma St. Louis Desire. It was not love at first sight. That would have been too easy. But he needed to know this faraway young woman with the melancholy gaze. And perhaps — just perhaps — she needed to know him!

He steeped himself in Puma's 205 recorded songs. He had copies made on fine old-fashioned rag paper of the books and articles devoted to her. From the African Archive of Cinema, he lasered a nearly perfect transcription of her only motion picture, *Songbird*. He papered the walls of his bedroom with magnified still photos of her eyes and her mouth and the curly gold of her hair.

Friends shook their heads.

"Ntsu is an atavist!" said one.

"He's a wax-lover," said another. "People who like waxies are sick!"

A third friend, who was also a clinical psychologist, launched into a learned disquisition on the affinity between shy people, alienated from their own place and time, and the strange waxen hues and features of the Caucasian race.

"The only way that a man with Obasanjo's syndrome can feel comfortable in a sexual relationship is to fix his attentions on someone exotic, or remote, or inaccessible, someone who is herself alienated, by circumstance or preference, from society."

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In due course the judgments of the friends of Ntsu reached his ears, but only he smiled and wrote poems in memory of Puma St. Louis Desire.

What he most treasured in her songs was their aura of fawnlike vulnerability. In "Blue Rain," a ballad that climbed to the top of the "charts" in 1996, she sang of rains blue with sadness, on the day when the wind took Bobby away. She walked through the storm, blind and careworn, on the day when the wind took Bobby away. For the rest of her life, whenever it rained, she'd remember the pain, of the day when the wind took Bobby away.

The same message recurred in "Lonely Girl," "Dreamin'," "I'm Sorry —Are You?", and her biggest hit, "In Love with Your Shadow."

Puma's only film was the plaintivé tale of a young singer who found true love. Her fiancé was handsome and generous. The wedding date had been set. But shortly before the happy day, she learned that he also had a male lover and that all three of them were dying of AIDS (in those times an incurable disease). Ntsu longed to take the stricken songbird in his arms and warm her and console her, and bring joy into her life at last.

Unless she was not stricken at all. The evidence of the "fan" magazines preserved in African libraries suggested that in her own life — as opposed to the life depicted on film and disc — Puma had been a simple, healthy, fun-loving tomboy with a broad smile and a hyperactive ego.

"That's not the real Puma!" he said to himself. "It's what her agent wanted the world to believe. But it's not the real Puma. I see into her heart."

And the more time Ntsu Mpakati spent spelunking in the heart of Puma St. Louis Desire, the deeper he fell, and fell, and fell, until he was irretrievably lost.

In the end he had no choice but to go to her.

* * *

COULD HE succeed? Could he become the lover, or even — marvel of marvels! — the husband of Puma St. Louis Desire?

Clearly it was possible. Reviewing in painstaking detail the available facts of her life, Ntsu hit upon one encouraging morsel of evidence that he had overlooked before: the brief mysterious disappearance, and amnesia, of Bradley Aznavorian.

Bradley was not someone of intrinsic interest to a gynolatrist like Ntsu. During the earlier stages of his infatuation with Puma, he crowded

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all thoughts of Bradley from his mind. The mere sight of the man sufficed to curdle his stomach.

Nevertheless, Bradley Aznavorian was the Old-Time rock guitarist with the scraggly beard and wild eyes and fashionable skintight red leather suit who in 2001 had married Puma after a long courtship and given her the child that broke so disastrously the momentum of her career.

And Bradley Aznavorian was the man who, from all accounts, Puma loved more than anyone else on earth.

Yet, two months before their nuptials, when the media were covering every twist and turn of the affair, he vanished. Puma had begged the Los Angeles police to investigate. After hearing the ominous details, the LAPD took the case, stoking rumors that Bradley's disappearance was no publicity stunt or flight from responsibility, but a bona fide act of foul play.

Media photos taken of Puma during the ten painful days that followed showed her elfin face seamed with anxiety and grief. The slightly parted lips did not grin. The gray eyes were not merry. For the time, at least, Puma St. Louis Desire was indeed the woman limned in her lugubrious ballads, forlorn and forsaken, friendless in all the world.

"I love you, Puma," Ntsu sighed. "And this is your true self."

Then, without warning, Bradley had returned. Dazed and disoriented, he appeared at the gate of Puma's secluded home in Beverly Hills, remembering nothing of the missing time. The doctors found evidence of a possible concussion, and also noted a shaved spot on the side of his otherwise exceptionally hirsute cranium. His amnesia seemed genuine. Yet his spirits were excellent. TV screens everywhere crackled with images of the gleeful couple, smiling and hugging.

"I feel like a new man!" the guitarist told every reporter he met. "I'm with Puma now and forever!"

Ntsu read the newspaper stories over and over again. Then he smiled. He took a great breath, filling his lungs with the oxygen of hope. For the first time since he saw Puma's poster hanging in the World Exhibition of Media Arts, he felt a sense of deliverance. The events reported in the press those many years ago could bear only one interpretation.

Therefore he could no longer despise Bradley Aznavorian. Uncouth, unworthy though the man may have been, he had brought joy to the melancholy life of his princess. He had rescued Melisande from the Golauds of the world, and given her peace.

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But how? How had he managed such a thing, against all the odds in affairs of the heart between pop-rock musicians in early-twenty-first century California? Ntsu looked at the reflection of his darkly burnished face in the window of his sunlit study, and smiled again. Not to worry! He knew Bradley's secret. It was safe with him. No one, least of all Puma, had anything to fear!

After tidying up his personal life, and entrusting the reading of his poetry to a suitable apprentice, Ntsu tubed to the Time Hall in Dar es Salaam.

In the 2320s there were only five such halls in all of Africa, and only two elsewhere. The era of the portable chronophage with self-sealing entryways had not yet dawned. Time journeys were tortuous, expensive, and not entirely safe.

Even the superiority of antitritium as a fuel for the propagation of antispace had not yet been discovered. The chambers of the generator relied on simple collisions of helium and antihelium, adequate for one-way transport through antispace to selected points in past time, but useless for explorations of the traveler's own future (since the future did not yet exist, and therefore could not be scanned or mapped). Worse yet, the retrieval rate was only 99.7 percent. Subjects sometimes had to wait a week and endure a dozen false, gut-wrenching lifts before the tractor flow took firm hold and they could continue their journey or return home.

But none of this troubled Ntsu. He was a man with a mission.

Arriving at the station in Dar es Salaam, he stepped briskly out of his magnetrain compartment into a waiting hovercar, and in five minutes found himself in the spacious lobby of the Time Hall, where an attendant greeted him, right on schedule, with an appropriate change of clothes. As befits a seasoned chrononaut, Ntsu waived the usual cautions and briefings. His coded instructions to the engineer took only a moment to explain and program.

"Let's go," he said in a tremulous voice.

"There's no time like the present," the engineer laughed. Ntsu winced.

It was a routine rapture. He lost consciousness in his cabin, and almost immediately woke up again, sitting on the curb of West Lemon Street in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, at 11:45 a.m. on Saturday, the 19th of October, A.D. 1985.

Why such a place? And why such a time?

Ntsu Mpakati had done his homework, learning as much as anyone

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could from the meager materials that survived the Cataclysm of 2028. From Patagonia to Tasmania, he had ransacked every archive. To find the real Puma, he needed to begin with the girl, before she became a woman, before New York and Las Vegas and Hollywood had taken their toll of her innocence.

In 1985 her name was Mildred Moedinger, and she was eleven years old. Ntsu found her in just a few minutes, her cheekbones less prominent, her not-yet-golden curls brown and bobbed, her figure gawky, yet with hints of the grace to come.

She was riding a new bicycle up and down the street. As another cyclist, a neighbor boy, rode fiercely toward her, she screeched.

The boy laughed and swerved to miss her.

Then Puma laughed, too, and chased the boy. Ntsu followed the pair to the corner of Lemon and Mary streets. They bolted down Mary, heading against the traffic on the one-way street, Puma gaining on her playmate, until she rammed his back wheel. He lost his balance and fell. A car driving north braked to avoid hitting him as he lay sprawling in the middle of the street.

Puma laughed again, turned, and pedaled back to the intersection.

"You asshole!" screamed the boy, limping off to rescue his bicycle. "I'll pay you back, asshole. I nearly got killed!"

"Nearly's not good enough!" she cried. "Next time I'll do a better job."

The boy chased her on foot, favoring his injured leg, but she kept ahead of him.

Further mayhem was forestalled when the boy's father appeared at the front door of their house and called him for lunch.

Now Puma was alone. She parked her bicycle and reached down into a pile of fallen leaves in the gutter, from which she extracted a dark brown horse chestnut, as big as a golf ball. She polished the nut on the leg of her jeans. Then she sat down on another neighbor's front steps and, elbows on knees, stared intently at her prize.

Ntsu walked slowly by. As he passed her, she looked up at the luminous October sky. He could see the sky in her large gray eyes, a soft shining that belonged not to a young Pennsylvania German girl but to Puma St. Louis Desire.

Ntsu forced himself to stop and turn, although it took every scrap of willpower at his command. He took a breath, held it, and smiled at her.

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"Are you, I mean, are you O.K.?" he stammered. His heart burned in his chest.

She glanced up at him, not speaking.

He took another, much deeper breath. "I don't want to interfere, but I couldn't help seeing the accident. I hope, well, what I mean is, I hope you weren't hurt."

She stared at the chestnut in her hand.

"What do you want?" she asked in a monotone.

He put up his hands, feeling panic. "Not a thing, Millie. Not a thing. Please. Believe me."

She started. "You know who I am? I've never seen you before."

Ntsu smiled. "I live around here, kind of. I've noticed you."

She grunted and rose to her full 146 centimeters. "Yeah, well, I gotta go home." She looked uncomfortable, and Ntsu bit his lip.

"Forgive me," he said. "I didn't mean to scare you, honestly. Have a nice day." He walked on without looking back, feeling mingled joy and misery.

The cozy little red-brick row houses glistened in the sun. He passed hers, which he recognized from a photograph in an album sold at the concerts of her Songbird World Tour. It looked much smaller, almost like a house for dolls. He peered through the living room windows, but he saw no one.

For the next week, Ntsu hovered close by, without daring to approach her again. He watched Puma go to church with her family, walk to school laughing and talking with friends, stroll to Buchanan Park one evening with the neighbor boy. He followed them at a discreet distance as they wandered through the park and into the campus of Franklin and Marshall College. They played a game on the steps of the library, running up and down almost randomly until they collapsed in a heap on the grass. The boy went back to the park, but Puma turned down College Avenue toward Lemon Street.

Ntsu longed to join her as she walked home. He considered posing as a magazine writer, or a TV newsman, or a psychologist on a research project. He had so much to tell her, so much to learn from her! She might even remember him, in later years, and think sometimes of their talks together.

But he could not muster the courage. In any case, Puma was still too young, too unformed. Only the depths in her pellucid gray eyes betokened the woman who was yet to come.

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On October 26, Ntsu reached the transfer point an hour before the appointed time.

His next three journeys allowed him to watch the flowering of Puma St. Louis Desire. At fourteen she had grown twenty centimeters, her breasts pushed gently against her shirt, and she was a student at John Reynolds Junior High School on Walnut Street, a few blocks from her home. She had acquired an Irish setter — a tall, excitable dog with flaming dark red hair who followed her everywhere — and boyfriends, and a shocking vocabulary.

When she was seventeen, she and her family had moved to a house in the country, near Ephrata. They kept two horses, which she rode at every opportunity, hair flying in the wind, the faithful setter left behind to whimper and pace.

At twenty she had changed her first name to Puma and started touring the country with bands. Ntsu caught up with her at the Checker Dome in St. Louis. She was singing backup for Maybelle McKutcheon and Walrus, except that while Maybelle changed costumes for the second hour of the show, they let Puma sing a solo ballad.

Ntsu had often seen the video, which became famous in later years. But to attend the original performance, on the same night that the great rock critic Dazzy Pepino was also in the audience!

Ntsu tried to pick him out, but missed him in the crowd. The next day, Dazzy would write the story for *Weeksworth* that propelled Puma to instant stardom and gave her a new middle name.

Ntsu could quote the whole notice by heart.

> *At halftime, Puma Moedinger — the name needs work — wrapped a Tony Tamblyn ditty, "Wherever You Are," around her ample vocal cords. She gathered more fives from the fans than all the rest of the evening's otherwise routine entertainment put together.*
>
> *The mob at the Checker Dome smelled fresh blood, and this new melt-in-your-mouth honey blonde is about as fresh as they make 'em. I can't tell you how, but she managed to project rock razzle and pop pizzazz and old-fashioned romantic pathos all at the same time, in a goofy song that Madonna at her peak couldn't have salvaged strutting on the stage stark naked.*
>
> *Last night, Puma doll, was St. Louis ever good for you!*

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* * *

Weeks later, after she signed the contract for her first album, Puma became Puma St. Louis Desire. The origin of her last name was unknown, even to deeply read specialists like Ntsu. But after fans had grown accustomed to its cadence, no one could imagine her by any other. The *New York Times*, with its customary straight face, always referred to her in its grave reviews of her albums and concerts as Ms. Desire.

The evening itself went by much too quickly. Ntsu was accustomed to rolling the video of "Wherever You Are" at least five times at a sitting, but now he had to concentrate all his attention on a single, unique, perishable span of three and a half minutes.

The girl next to him was masticating popcorn (cherry-caramel cheese corn, a fad of the mid-1990s). The man on his right was emitting the rancid scent of an undeodorized jock. The female couple directly behind him chattered and twittered like a pair of parakeets.

None of it made any difference. On the stage, twelve rows away, stood Puma St. Louise Desire. She was dressed in a simple floor-length turquoise gown bedecked with flashing sequins. She took the microphone in her fingers and rubbed it up and down as if it were a man's cock. She flashed a faint little-girlish smile at the crowd, looked down at her toes, raised her head to expose a perfect long white throat, and began to sing.

"Wherever you are," she warbled, "that's where I want to be." Her voice was as rich as double cream, her tone both innocent and sexual, daughterly and yet profoundly disturbing to every man in the crowd.

"Wherever you are, I want to be there, too." Ntsu felt his bones bend and shake.

"But you don't see me," she sang, the smile fading from her lips, "and I am turning blue."

As Puma looked upward at the word "blue," lights struck her sculpted face and illuminated her sad gray eyes.

"Wherever you are, that's where I want to be. Wherever you are, I want to be there, too. But you don't love me, not the way I love you."

"I feel so lonely, so lost, so lovelorn and tossed, I just don't know wha-a-a-a-t to do."

The smelly man next to Ntsu stopped fidgeting and muttered under his breath, "Jeez."

The band of electric guitars and drums and a single soprano sax played

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With each jump of three years, he had learned to love Puma more and more.

softly, as Puma stood all alone at the front of the stage, caressing her mike. Ntsu turned to stone with the intensity of his love and yearning. He had seen this girl-woman digging her spurs into the sweaty flanks of an exhausted horse and playing touch football with the guys and telling dirty jokes at the school cafeteria.

But this was a different Puma. "This is the real Puma," he said to himself. "This is you! Now and always, Puma!"

"Wherever you are," Puma started again, "that's where I want to be. Wherever you are, I want to be there, too. But you don't kiss me, not the way you used to do.

"I pray to God, to God above, give me back your love, the only star in Heaven I wa-a-a-nt is you."

A tear, a live natural, unrepeatable tear, stole down her cottony cheek as she stood there, transfixed, bathed in blue lights. The sax decorated her last line with a melancholy bleat of pain. The drummer tapped one soft tap. The song was over.

At first the crowd did nothing. Then from the front seats rose a mighty clamor, which passed like a great beast of sound from row to row until everyone in the Checker Dome was on his feet, stamping and clapping and cheering. Several young men tried to rush the stage and were repelled by security guards.

The fans applauded for five minutes, but Puma and the band had prepared only the one number, and all she could do was blush, and smile, and nod, and stand there in all her virginal splendor until another tear, from the same gray eyes, rolled resistlessly down the same cheek.

Ntsu Mpakati resolved to execute his plan. With each jump of three years, he had learned to love Puma more and more. Deprived of her, he suffered migraine headaches of skull-cracking ferocity. The pain drove him wild.

But he had scheduled no further encounters with Puma. Hereafter he could not hope to come near enough to exchange even a few words. She would be a star, and soon a superstar, shielded by friends and managers

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from strange faces. And Ntsu was too shy to violate her privacy.

The moment had come for stronger measures. At the Time Hall in Dar es Salaam, Ntsu had programmed only one more jump. At the preselected transfer point, the garden of the Huntington Library just east of Los Angeles, Ntsu flashed from the summer of 1994 to the autumn of 2001.

Once he had made up his mind, he acted swiftly. He rented a car and a motel room and made his way to the Amphitheatre, where Bradley Aznavorian was playing with Tea Trolley and the Rolling Scones. After the concert, Ntsu intercepted Bradley loading his gear into his van, gave him a painless injection, and returned to the motel with his quarry.

Dragging the slumbering musician into the bathtub, Ntsu shaved a small circular patch on the man's skull and plugged in his portable transpirator. From his pack he drew four psy-spools sheathed in luminescent topaz shells. He removed the spools from their casings and inserted them in the transpirator.

He downloaded the precious contents of the spools into Bradley's brain. Then he injected him with a suppressant, to keep Bradley's personality from resisting invasion or hiding memories. Even with the crude psychotropes of Ntsu's time, it was possible to paralyze the will of a victim for years with a single injection.

Ntsu looked at the man's stupefied face. He studied the wispy beard, the warty blemishes, the unkempt eyebrows, the hairy ears, the twice-broken nose, the pointed chin. He shuddered with loathing and revulsion.

"What in the name of the Absolute Suchness does she see in that face?" he murmured to himself.

Then he looked away. It was better not to dwell on such things. Soon enough he would know them all too well.

When the operation was over, the manager of the motel found a mysterious black man lying in the bathtub in a deep coma. The manager called an ambulance, which ferried the patient to a hospital, where neurologists conducted a lengthy series of tests. The tests told them nothing. The patient slept on and on, losing no weight, dreaming no dreams.

Meanwhile, a scruffy guitarist in a red leather suit took a holiday. He drove around California for ten days in his rented car. He could often be seen along the ocean, sitting on a rock, watching the waves, eyes filmed over, with a smile on his thin lips. Sometimes he appeared in the moun-

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tains or on a desert, always with the same small private smile, the same glazed eyes.

Once, to a drunken stranger in a bar, he told the story of all his sweet days and nights with Puma. The silky joys of her body. The fragrant kisses. The mornings sprawled on a rug, watching Puma rehearse songs on her grand piano. The long afternoon horse rides through the woods near Malibu, and the hidden glade where they sometimes made love for hours. The tennis and water polo and trips to Brazil and Capri.

The drunk stared and belched, belched and stared, and said nothing. Then the guitarist began reminiscing about himself, from his childhood in Memphis to his gigs with the Scones. The drunk, if he had been listening, could have become the world's reigning expert on the life and times and ecstasies of Bradley Aznavorian.

At one point in his monologue, the young man seemed to split into two distinct personalities. Recalling his sordid affair with a hooker in San Diego, his eyes grew wild. In a shrill and unfamiliar voice, he began to defend himself. Then his expression changed again. His voice deepened. Calmly, he took full responsibility for his misdeeds, vowing never to look at another woman.

He soon left the bar, and the next day arrived in Beverly Hills. Abandoning his car a half-mile from Puma's home, he went the rest of the way on foot. He greeted the elderly housekeeper at the front gate and told her all about his amnesia. Puma was called at her studio.

Hours later the man in the tight red suit was united with a joyful Puma. He held her flesh in his, pressed her slender body to his, and kissed her softly parted lips.

TV cameramen arrived from all points on the compass that afternoon to record the reunion for the evening news. The two lovebirds hugged and kissed on camera. They laughed and cried.

"I feel like a new man," the guitarist told every reporter in sight. "I'm with Puma now and forever!"

But it was no longer Bradley Aznavorian who lived in Bradley's body. It was Ntsu Mpakati, who had transpired all four spools of his psychic indentity into Bradley's paralyzed brain.

Two months later Ntsu became the husband of Puma St. Louis Desire.

At first all was better than well. The newlyweds honeymooned in

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Beijing at the new Walt Disney resort for the very rich, a faithful reconstruction of the imperial Forbidden City. Hunger for pleasure not yet satisfied, they flew to Argentina and rode wild horses on the pampas. Puma screamed with delight as the wind unfurled her golden hair. Ntsu was thrown several times, but managed to break no bones. Although in his own time he hated horses, in the presence of Puma they became magical creatures, sinewy totems of his love and dreaming.

For Ntsu, Puma was not a girl, not a woman, not a human being at all, but a divine incarnation. Making love to her every morning and night, tutored by Bradley's recollections of her favorite maneuvers, gave him more joy than he had ever felt.

She especially like having her nipples and velvety rump gently bitten before each onslaught. She would laugh deliriously as his teeth found their targets, and try to escape, writhing and shrieking, but he knew his job. Puma rewarded him with fits of passion almost too strong for Bradley's weedy, drug-dulled body to appease.

But he managed. He managed nicely.

Eventually they were joined by two of Puma's girlfriends, cabaret singers with raucous voices, who told thousands of dirty jokes and primed her with malicious gossip from California. Accompanying them were two boyfriends of indeterminate sexuality, and Puma's unkempt manager, Henny Heimlich.

The party wended its way northward after several weeks in Argentina, stopping off in Antigua and Nassau for the sun, and returning to California in mid-January, just in time for Puma's next recording sessions.

Ntsu remained unconscionably happy. His abominable shyness had not left him entirely, but by letting Bradley's body follow its own impulses, he got through his days with few slips.

He even learned to kid around with Henny and the girls and their blow-dried swains. No one suspected that in the innermost sanctum of his mind, he was scared and nervous, knowing these people only from Bradley's stolen memories.

Their routines became mindless, like a catechism.

"Go fuck yourself, Brad!" Henny would yell, on almost any occasion.

Ntsu would laugh. "You got it, Henny!"

Which was Henny's cue to lay a wet hand on one of the boyfriends and sneer. "Better yet Dimples here should get it, O.K.?"

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Ntsu would shrug. "Better you should buy yourself a butt plug, Henny."

So it went on. On the outside, Bradley Aznavorian, unflappable rock guitarist and fortunate husband of Puma St. Louis Desire, at ease with the star and her circle of scruffy friends.

On the inside, Ntsu Mpakati. Shy. Withdrawn. In love. In unquenchable love with Puma.

But in his search for the real Puma, Ntsu met with little success. He spied on her when she was not looking. He tried to draw her into meditations on her mysterious childhood, on her unhappy early loves, on the tragicomedy of life. She had nothing to say. She preferred horses and food and giggling with her girlfriends.

Only once in that first year of their marriage, and then only for a few seconds, did he catch a glimpse of Puma as she truly was.

He had gone off on a tour with Tea Trolley and returned a day before his scheduled arrival. He tiptoed through the house, hoping to surprise her.

Ntsu found Puma in bed, nursing a hangover. She was drinking ginger ale, lost in reverie, unaware of his return. Through the open door he saw her radiant little face, her lips pursed, her eyes half-closed.

He slipped into her room and came up behind her. She smiled wanly as he knelt on the bed and cradled her in his arms.

"What were you thinking, honey?' he asked.

"Oh, nothing."

"Please, tell me," he said gently, stroking her hair, and brushing her forehead with his fingertips. "You look so sad."

"I was just thinking—"

"Yes?"

"I was just thinking how hungry I am," she finished with a little yelp. "Go get me a hot dog."

He stared.

"I don't mean *your* hot dog, you pervert!" she laughed.

He fixed her two. She ate them both, one with mustard and relish, one au naturel.

Just before Christmas in 2002, a disaster occurred. Married for thirteen months, Ntsu had lost none of his love for Puma, but the rest of his life was a torment.

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Puma left him for weeks at a time to make personal appearances or attend to business; and even when she was in town, as often as not, Ntsu had to fly off with Tea Trolley and the Rolling Scones.

Before committing himself to his new life, Ntsu had not given much thought to Tea Trolley.

The band consisted of a lesbian vocalist from Akron who weighed three hundred pounds, and a ragged assortment of postadolescent males who were all authentic Brits except for Bradley. The Scones spent their free time surfing, playing poker, fornicating with fans, and drinking full-strength Jizz from unwashed Pepsi bottles.

Bradley's body had long since become more or less inured to Jizz. The psychological wear and tear on Ntsu was something else.

He substituted real Pepsi for the Jizz whenever he could. But the Scones liked to pass their bottles around, as, still earlier in Old Times, Flower Children had shared their marijuana cigarettes. On such occasions the best he could do was take a sip and pass it off as a swig.

But sometimes they caught him.

Ferdy (founding Scone and elder statesman of the band): "Chicken shit!"

Ntsu: "Whaddyamean?"

Ferdy: "You didn't drink your Jizz, mate!"

Ntsu: "Did."

Ferdy: "Didn't."

Ntsu: "Did."

Ferdy: "Balls! Let's 'ear it gurgle. I wants to 'ear it gurgle loud an' clear. I wants to 'ear ten manly glugs."

Ntsu: "Shove it up your arse."

Ferdy: "Fuckin' yes! Ten glugs, or else we tosses you in the fuckin' blue Pacific strapped to a fuckin' surfboard made of fuckin' bloody lead!"

Ntsu drank ten manly glugs of Jizz.

But the euphoria that Jizz bestowed on most of its addled consumers did not seize Ntsu Mpakati. He felt not so much lifted as wrenched, bent at right angles to himself, as if someone had screwed his head into his chest.

For a victim of Obasanjo's syndrome, life with Tea Trolley and the Rolling Scones was life in the deepest circle of Hell.

His single consolation, his rare ascents to Paradise, where his Beatrice awaited him, would have been enough, worth any agony, worth any horror

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in Tea Trolley's repertoire — if only his Beatrice had been true to herself. True to the vision who had wrung tears from the beasts of St. Louis. True to the melancholy waif of Lemon Street.

But Ntsu could not find the waif inside the woman. And the woman had no inkling of the poet inside the Scone.

The disaster came on a wet Tuesday night in late December. It was Christmas Eve.

Ntsu heard loud talking in Puma's bedroom as he staggered into his own, weary from partying till midnight in Pasadena with his brother Scones. He wanted only to sleep, but the noise defeated his best efforts.

He started to open the door connecting their rooms, the portal to Paradise whose threshold he had so often crossed, when he caught a few words that froze his feet.

It was Puma, shrill and insistent. "You bastard! Take your flippers off me. Take your slimy wet flippers off my bod!"

In a lower voice, tremulous with fear and lust, Henny Heimlich was pleading with Puma. "Come on, doll, let me. Come on, be good to Papa like you were last week in Vegas. We gotta be fast. The geek'll be back anytime."

Ntsu heard a sharp crack, as of a hand connecting with a face at fifty kilometers an hour.

"That geek is my husband, Henny," she said, louder than before. "Do you know what a husband is, you goddamn seal?"

"Shh. He's a guy who could be walking in this house right now! Don't you like me anymore? What is it with you? What's with the husband shit? He didn't stop you in Vegas!"

She screamed. "That's *my* business! A girl's gotta live. But when Brad and I are both in town, we screw each other, not you, fishface!"

Henny screamed back. "What the hell is the matter with you? I suppose you *love* that turd?"

"I don't give a shit for anybody, least of all you!"

Ntsu slipped back into his bed. In a few minutes he heard the outer door of Puma's bedroom slam.

The next moring, Christmas morning, he and Puma went riding in the woods and made love in their private glade. But it was not the same.

"Puma," he said, when they were resting on horse blankets after the fray. "Puma, have you ever slept with a black man?"

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"You gotta be kidding."

"Why not?"

"I don't like the smell."

IN THE spring of 2003, Bradley Aznavorian began to wake up. It was too soon, but sometimes the suppressant did wear off early.

"Man, where am I?" said a small voice in the back of Ntsu's borrowed head.

"Is that you, Bradley?" said Ntsu to himself.

"Yeah. Where the hell am I?"

"You're home, in Beverly Hills, in your own body, Bradley. Nothing to worry about."

Then the small voice went dead.

"Bradley?" asked Ntsu softly. "Are you still there?"

No reply. But Ntsu knew that Bradley would be back. And next day, he was, less groggy, more sure of himself.

"Who the fuck are you? What are you doin' in my head?" the voice said, much louder this time.

"I borrowed your body for a while."

"Shit. I can't see."

"I'm controlling your optical nerves."

A pause.

"Would you mind movin' over, so I can see, too?"

"Yes, I would mind. You need more rest."

"Like hell I do. What time is it?"

"About eleven in the morning."

"Fuck you! I mean what day, what year? I feel like I been asleep for a century."

"It doesn't matter. When I don't need your body, I'll put it back just the way it was, rejuvenate your tissues, unlock your will. You'll be as good as new, and as young as the day I borrowed you."

"What the fuck are you talkin' about?"

"There's no need to explain. You'll be asleep soon, and when you wake up for good, you won't remember any of this. I'm just telling you to quiet my own conscience."

"Conscience?" the voice exploded. "Conscience! Shit! Anybody with a fuckin' conscience would get the fuck out of my fuckin' head."

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"Take it easy! You'll be back again before you know it."

"Yeah? And what about Puma? Did we get married yet?"

"Could be."

"Shit! I asked you a question, man!"

"Yes, we're married, Puma and I."

"You mean Puma and me!"

"Sort of."

"Goddamn right."

"Do you love Puma, Bradley? Tell me the truth."

The voice muttered something.

"Tell me if you love Puma."

"Love? Shit, man, I don't know what love is. We're just good together, that's all. When we're in the same town, we hang out. What's wrong with that? And who the fuck are you? You ain't told me nothin' yet!"

"Trust me. It doesn't matter."

Ntsu gave himself a second injection.

Bradley felt it immediately. "Hey, man, what did you just do? What's goin' on?"

The psychotrope traveled like a bullet through his bloodstream to the cortical segment where his consciousness had reintegrated.

Bradley slept deeply.

But that was the end.

On May 15, 2003, Puma announced she was pregnant. They toasted the occasion with a little Jizz, and Ntsu kissed her tenderly on her stomach.

The next day he prevailed on Henny Heimlich to give him a personal copy of Puma's publicity portfolio. It had stills from all the phases of her career, and assorted concert programs, notices, feature stories — everything that bore on the artistic life of Puma St. Louis Desire.

"Thanks, Henny," said Ntsu, gripping the manager's wet hand firmly. "I really mean that."

"Sure, kid, sure, anything I can do," said Henny, wriggling out of Ntsu's grasp, and giving him a quizzical look. "You O.K.?"

"As good as I can be."

"Uh-huh."

"Don't worry about me, Henny. I'm fine."

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Ntsu put the portfolio in a large briefcase and, masquerading as a medical iournalist, paid a visit to his old body, still comatose and still hale, in the hospital where he had left it almost two years before.

When the attending nurse stepped out of the room, Ntsu unpacked his transpirator and downloaded the memories of the past twenty months into the slumbering brain on the bed. Then he injected his white self with countersuppressants and rejuvenants, and his black self with a vivificant.

The nurse returned in a few minutes to ask the journalist to leave, but he had already gone.

So had the sleeper.

Outside the hospital a police officer noticed a black man and a white man in a red leather suit walking to the parking lot together. Just before the white man got into his car, the black man put his arms around him. They gave each other a brotherly hug.

Friends remarked on how content Ntsu seemed after his return from Old Time.

They often screened him at home leafing through Puma's portfolio, gazing at the sad gray eyes in the publicity stills, the pointed little chin, the delicate fingers splayed in sorrow on her bosom.

His favorite was the shot of Puma singing the final notes of "Wherever You Are," with a solitary crystal tear stealing down her cheek.

In the pages of his beloved portfolio, after so many struggles, so much dreaming, Ntsu Mpakati had found at last the one, the true, the real Puma St. Louis Desire.

Coming Soon

Next month: "Lost In Cleveland" by *Vance Aandahl*, an SF story about a basketball game of the future. Plus new stories by *Joyce Carol Oates* and *George Alec Effinger*.

Soon: Watch for the October 40th anniversary issue, including "The Happy Turnip" by *Thomas M. Disch* and "Friendship Light" by *Gene Wolfe*, among many other outstanding stories.

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Good strong action SF seems in short supply these days. Here's a welcome new tale about a strange new breed of cops in a terrifying, not-so-far future.

Termin'ator

By Michael Armstrong

RIGGES WAS SUCKING on an inhaler of syntrans when the call came through. His partner, Marenok, knocked gently on the door of his cubicle as Rigges held the vial of medicine. He looked at her, saw the cold glare in her eyes, and nodded.

"You O.K.?" she asked.

He put the bottle down, wiped the back of his hand across his lips, and smiled. "Yeah. Yeah, sure. You got one for us?"

"Mucker," she said. "Six down already. He's holed up in a sushi-'n'-spuds place with fifteen hostages."

"Shit," he said, rising. He stripped his shirt off, walked over to a gray metal locker, began yanking odd little attachments out. A harness crossed down his back and over his chest, bottle strapped to the harness like bullets in a bandolier. "*Shit.*" Rigges handed Marenok the odd little attachments. "Do me, O.K.?" He pointed with his chin at the syntrans. "Load me up good on the stuff. The damn IDS has thrown my lungs out of whack again."

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"Right."

Rigges sat down on a wooden stool, held his arms up as the spiked blonde police sergeant began checking his harness. Rigges winced as Marenok slid the IV tube out of the permanent tube in his armpit, replaced the IV, and slid it back in. He smiled as the test drugs — a few cc's of ope-a-dope, some saline solution, and antibiotics to round out the first kick — oozed into his system. Marenok ran down the checklist, slipping in new drugs, taking others out, all according to Rigges's latest medical report, according to the ravages of the latest immune deficiency syndrome attack the doc had to counterattack. Rigges liked the way she didn't use gloves, liked the warm touch of her hands on his skin, liked that she wasn't afraid to touch him.

But then, she'd already gone IRC, hadn't she? he thought.

"Fill me in," he said to her. She didn't rush; he didn't rush — if they'd called him in, he knew, that meant the mucker had chilled out for the moment. If he hadn't, the hostages would have been already dead, or the mucker, or both.

"White male, early thirties, stable marriage, good job, no previous record."

Rigges nodded; weren't they all like that? "Cammo?"

"Cammo." She strapped a boxlike thing to the harness, pulled a series of wires out from it.

"They always wear cammo. Tiger commando, tree bark, or woodland?"

"Blaze orange." Marenok glued a mike to his chin.

"Damn." Blaze — bright orange dappled with dark patterning — meant a hunter, not some weekend Rambo. Serious, good with a rifle. "Armed? Automatic?"

"Uzi." She pasted an electrode over his heart. "They always have Uzis. He's got a rifle, too. Sprague in Intelligence says it's a Swedish Mauser, 6.5 millimeter. It's got a gentle little kick, but they're damn antiques and you have to handload the rounds — Swedes don't make standard ammo like that anymore." Marenok adjusted the boxlike thing, turned it slightly so he could see a row of lights and numbers flickering across the top.

"So he won't have a lot."

Marenok patted his back, turned the mucker pack batteries on, watched as the sensor display lit up green. "She needs only one shot."

"You said 'he' before."

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She frowned at the voice display, dialed the throat mike down a notch. "Did I? He, she — the mucker's a trans: beard, tits, and probably both genitalia. Sprague says the hips make it an original female, but we're not quibbling." She ran a tube across from the drug bandolier and up the inside of his left arm. "Clench your fist." She strapped a little needle to his wrist. Rigges unclenched his fist, and the needle slid back in its shaft, like a cat's claws retracting. "All set."

"Good." Rigges stood, put his shirt back on over the mucker pack. "Everything cool?"

"Breathe in."

Rigges did, felt the syntrans slip up his nostrils — from a nozzle on the chin mike, he thought. "Copacetic." He slipped on his fleece-lined windbreaker, the one with NEGOTIATOR in big white letters on the back and front. "Let's go."

Marenok drove the big Plymouth ground-effect sedan, smoothly, carefully, Rigges next to her watching his readout flicker across the monitor. Respiration, cool; heartbeat, fine. The little lamp over the button that said "armed" was off, which suited him fine. Marenok glanced over at him, and Rigges felt her gaze, turned to his left, grinned.

"You —?"

"I'm O.K.," he said.

"They show you the latest readout?"

He shook his head. "You know that. Once you're down to six months, they don't show you anything."

"I heard . . . I heard some of that new stuff works pretty well."

"The syntrans keeps my lungs clear. The ope-a-dope's good shit."

She reached over, patted his hand. "My apartment's on the way." She patted his hand again.

He turned in his seat, looked at her, looked away. "No. Not now. Not if you think I'm going to die. Not if you didn't want to before."

"I *did* want to before. I was just. . . ." Marenok looked at him, looked away. Rigges had seen that look before, seen it in his first wife when the tests had come back, seen it in the beat cops in the cafeteria, seen it in faces scuttling away from him on the bus. "I was just scared," Marenok finished.

"You're IRC now, aren't you?" He looked at her. "Aren't you?" he repeated, until she turned his way.

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"IDS," she said, pushing back her left jacket sleeve, showing him the sores. "Four years, type nineteen, environmentally triggered, noncontagious, Strontium!" She slammed the dashboard. "Goddamn road paint! Who doesn't get that? You ride around in cars, it's a nice day, breathe the air, and it just flakes up into the air and into your lungs! Strontium!" She turned away, rolled her jacket sleeve back down. "You want to go by my apartment?"

Rigges reached over, patted her thigh. "Later. After I, uh, waste this mucker." Marenok smiled, and he looked at the little spikes of her hair, the way the light caught it in a halo, the way the longer strands stuck down over her eyes, the way the goo on it glistened like the tears glistening on her eyelashes.

Strontium, he thought. Fuck.

MARENOK pulled the Plymouth up next to a ring of cars cordoning off the sushi 'n' spuds. She flashed an ID card at the beat cop guarding the street leading into the fast-food joint, eased in next to a big blue van. Media cameras floated around the dome building, the police repulsor fields keeping the cameras back. A lens swiveled toward Marenok as she got out of the car, and ten more lenses jerked their way when Rigges with his NEGOTIATOR jacket followed her. The minicams hovered around him, little tinny speakers burping questions at him. Rigges swatted at one of them, then reached down for a button on his belt, smiled as his harness kicked out a field of static that sent the minicams zipping away.

A man in holographic cammo came up to them, SPRAGUE shimmering on the pocket of his shirt. His suit flickered from the blue of the police van behind him to the bright yellow of the sushi-'n'-spuds place as he stepped toward them.

"Rigges, Marenok, glad you came. The mucker's still waiting."

"He give you a deadline?"

"Two hours, but no demands. He doesn't want anything. He's just playing terror."

"They need food?" Rigges asked, realizing as he said it how stupid the question was.

Sprague jerked his head at the restaurant, smiled. "Are you kidding?" He looked at the monitor box Rigges still held. "You armed yet?" Rigges shook his head. "O.K.: I'll run this one."

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"Marenok will," Rigges said.

Sprague stared at her, stared at him, shook his head. "I'll run this one," he said. "You know why." He reached out, took the box from him.

Rigges glanced over at Marenok, shrugged. She smiled. "Ready?"

"Yeah." He looked at Sprague, at the box. Sprague flicked a switch, and a red light lit up on the monitor's display. Rigges reached out, put his right thumb on a pad on the box, jerked it back as the pad sparked. A green light went on below the red light. Rubbing his thumb, brushing the gray ash of the fried skin off of it, he turned to Marenok. "We still got a date?"

She reached out, squeezed his shoulder. "Sure thing, stallion." Marenok turned, went with Sprague over to the van.

"O.K.," he whispered.

"Reading," Sprague said.

He heard a click in his left ear, and Marenok whispered. "Reading, toots." Rigges walked toward the dome, the repulsor shield shimmering to let him in, opaqueing to gray as he walked into the restaurant.

The mucker whirled as Rigges came through the irising front door of the sushi-'n'-spuds shop. Rigges smiled, held up his hands, stared at the barrel of the Mauser rising up to his chest. The hostages lay half-naked in a semi-circle before the mucker, shirts slipped down around their arms, pants and underpants around their legs. Fourteen sets of bare asses stuck up from the bodies. Six bodies lay slumped in chairs, over the counter. He watched the prone hostages, looking for the gentle rise and fall of their backs. All alive. O.K. Some of the faces turned to him as he walked in, then quickly turned away when they saw what he was.

"Stay!" the mucker screamed at him in a false bass.

"Original female," Sprague said through his earphones. "She's faking it. You'd get a real bass if she'd been male or if she had testosterone treatments. Can't reverse vocal-cord stretching."

"I'm staying," Rigges said.

"I don't want to talk to you! I don't want to talk to anybody! You just leave, O.K.? I won't shoot you if you just leave."

"I can't leave, ma'am," Rigges said.

"Yes, you can."

"No, ma'am, I can't. They won't let me." He jerked with his head toward a window, changing from gray to black. "The repulsor field's on full now.

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Nothing will get in. Nothing will get out until they turn it off."

Rigges looked over the mucker, scanning every fold of her orange cammo jumpsuit. A bandolier stretched across one breast; twenty brass rounds. The Uzi hung on a shoulder strap, and six magazines for the Uzi dangled from her belt. Another bandolier stretched across the other breast, four blocks of something pasted to it, a row of batteries below the four blocks, and two wires running up from the blocks to a shaved patch over the mucker's right ear.

"Your eye's picking her up," Sprague's tinny voice said in his ear. "We see it; looks like plastic explosives connected to a deadman switch."

Damn, Rigges thought. Can't snuff her right out, then. He smiled at the mucker.

"Come here," she said, motioning at an empty chair next to hers. "Sit down."

Rigges stepped over the hostages, hands still out before him, eyes on the mucker's hands. The bolt of the Mauser stood straight up. He grinned at that: she'd ejected a shell, but hadn't loaded a new one. Rigges slid into the chair, put his hands in front of him on his thighs. "Well," he said. "Nice day."

"Shut up!" She sat back down, resting the Mauser on her knee, pushing at her short clipped beard, one edge of the false hair coming undone. "You're dead, you know."

"I knew that," he said. "Dead one way or the other. You know about negotiators, don't you? You know who it is they give the job to?" The mucker looked at him, cocked her head. Rigges smiled. He had her. "Idsers, you know. Deadsers. Immune deficient syndrome patients." That revelation didn't seem to have an effect on the mucker. She just glared at him. "You know about IDS, don't you?" You know about air? he thought. You know about the moon?

"Sure," she said. "Sure. Like the disease those faggots used to get, AIDS."

"Not just gays got it," he said, thinking about an uncle who'd died from AIDS ten years ago; he'd been a hemophiliac. "They dropped the 'acquired' when they figured out *everyone* had it, a little ticking time bomb that got turned on by some environmental trigger. The medicals thought that dropping the *A* would get people thinking it wasn't something you just picked up, that it was something that just *happened*." Wrong, he thought. Didn't matter. You might as well as be a leper.

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"So IDS is like AIDS except you don't have to butt-fuck a fag to get it?"

Rigges sighed; ignorance died hard. "Yeah. And I've got IDS." He waited for the typical reaction, the way people backed off from you when they found out your disease, but the mucker didn't flinch. Tough ass, he thought, or high to the ends of her neurons. She still didn't understand. He shrugged, crossed his legs, slowly. "You ever watch old movies?"

The mucker smiled. "Yeah — yeah, on the gray eye, all the time."

"Ever see an old one, with that senator in it, Schwarzenegger? *Terminator*?"

"Yeah, yeah," she said. "I saw that one. 'Bout a robot, right? Bigmeanmotherfucker, right?"

"Right," Rigges said. "Bigmeanmotherfucker. Anyway, that's what they call us in the force: Terminators."

The mucker frowned. "I don't get it."

"Terminal. Negotiators. Terminators. I'm terminal. And, like they say in the movies, 'You're terminated' — bitch." He uncrossed his legs.

"*You're* terminated." The mucker stood up, shoved the Mauser at Rigges. "I'll blow you, filthy."

Rigges reached up, pushed the tip of the barrel away. "Uh-uh. You want to live. You thought this was play. You thought it'd be like the gray eye: lots of vidcams, a little drama on the evening news, a showy trial, maybe a book-'n'-tube deal. But it's not. So you won't kill me, right? Because you kill me, and you die, they die, we all die." He tapped his chest, unbuttoned his shirt, peeled the shirt back so the little box over his sternum, at the center of the harness, poked out. The little red arming light shone up at him, a series of numbers flickering away below the light. "If I die, and if I don't get out of here in, oh. . . ."

"Twenty minutes, thirty-five seconds," Sprague said.

"In, oh, about twenty minutes," Rigges continued, "this little nuke on my chest will blow. They'll seal up the repulsor field until it dies down, and when they open it up, there will be this little glassy crater here. You've seen those, haven't you — little glassy craters?"

"Yeah. . . ."

"We don't like muckers like you, bitch. And we don't particularly care about hostages, see. So: you're terminated."

"Yeah? We'll see." The mucker slid the bolt on the Mauser back and down: a shell in the chamber, bolt cocked.

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Uh-oh, thought Rigges. "You got a name?" he asked. "They call me Joe. Well, not Joe — Rigges."

"Rigges? What kind of name is that?"

Rigges shrugged. "The one my mama gave me. What name did your mama give you?"

The mucker smiled. "Angela." Her right hand shook.

"Angie? That's a pretty name for a broad with a beard," Rigges said.

"Fuck you," Angie said.

"I doubt it," Rigges replied. "I like my sexual partners somewhat less ambiguous."

The mucker shoved the Mauser forward, jammed it into Rigges stomach, right below the nuke. She pulled back on the trigger. Mauser's a military rifle, Rigges thought. It would have a hard pull — didn't want soldiers to shoot unless they really wanted to shoot. Make it conscious. Rigges yawned. "Anything to eat around here?" The mucker's trigger finger relaxed, and she pulled the Mauser back.

"Oh yeah, lots to eat."

"Any tekkamakki? I really like tekkamakki." Rigges looked around the restaurant. One of the hostages crawled like a caterpillar, butt waving high, toward a sliver of glass on the floor. Oh great, thought Rigges. A hero.

"There's some in that cooler," the mucker said in a normal woman's voice. She pointed with the barrel at a glass cabinet near the counter.

Rigges got up — slowly — yawned, walked by the creeping hostage. He kicked the sliver of glass away from the man, well out of his reach. The hostage looked up at him, his lips moving in an angry epithet beneath the silver duct tape over his mouth. Rigges smiled back. "You want anything, Angie?"

"Tekkamakki sounds fine," she said.

"You might hurry it along," Sprague said in his headset. "Ten minutes, forty-five seconds."

"Tekkemakki, then." Rigges smiled to himself. The mucker had calmed down. She was accepting food. She was talking in a normal voice. Good. Very good, he thought. We can wrap this up quickly.

He took two plates of sliced sushi rolls, splashed some soy sauce in the little dishes on the side of the plate, walked back over to the mucker, grabbed some chopsticks from a table. Rigges laid one plate on the floor,

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sat down, laid the other plate on his lap. The mucker had tracked him on his short walk across the room, kept the rifle aimed at him as he sat down again.

"Nine minutes, ten seconds," Sprague said. "We've analyzed her handloads. She's using a 5.6-millimeter bullet pinched in a .30-06 cartridge. The bullet's going to flop around going out, so it will be a little unstable, and the shell might jam." Rigges looked down at a pile of spent brass on the floor, and the camera in his right eye picked it up. "Then again, maybe not," Sprague added.

Rigges smiled at the mucker, opened the little tissue over the chopsticks, rubbed them back and forth against each other to get rid of splinters. He mixed some wasabi into the soy sauce, picked up a tuna roll, handed it with the chopsticks to the mucker.

"Here," he said, "your hands are full."

Angie opened her mouth, turned her face up to take the sushi, her eyes tracking his hand and the tekkamakki, little drops of soy sauce dripping off the rice and onto her lips. Rigges glanced down at the Mauser, noticed the barrel angled slightly to his right, toward the floor, and that her grip had relaxed. He clenched his left fist, and the little needle flicked out from under his long sleeve.

Rigges lowered the sushi roll onto her mouth, leaning forward a bit as he did so. Her incisors closed around the chopsticks, pulling the tekkamakki from between the two sticks. Rigges sighed; it was too damn easy. He shoved the chopsticks down her throat, pushing them back against her tongue, against her epiglottis. Suddenly standing, he pushed the Mauser down with his left knee, then reached up with his left hand and crammed the needle into her neck. Out of a corner of his eye, he saw the hostages squirm away, like slugs exposed to bright light, and saw the bold hostage, the hero, surge toward the mucker.

The mucker twitched, shook, then fell off her chair and rolled to the floor. The hostage hero got to his feet, legs slightly bowed, and hopped over, eyes wide and white. Rigges shook his head, stepped over, and stiff-armed the man to the ground.

"O.K.," he said, "let's get in here." He knelt by the mucker, checked her vitals. Pulse rapid but fine. The hole in her neck where he'd pushed the needle in dripped a little blood. He opened her mouth, pulled the chopsticks out, reached around and pulled out the tekkamakki. Didn't want her choking on him.

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"Sprague, let's get this mucker out of here." He tapped his neck, heard the feedback of his throat mike. "Sprague? Marenok? Hello?"

"Uh, Rigges, you've got four minutes."

"Sprague, the mucker's out. I zapped her. She's sleepy-bye. You can come get her." Rigges looked down at the little nuke on his chest. "Open the repulsor field, please."

"Repulsor field won't open, Rigges."

"*Won't open*? Press the goddamn switch, guys."

Marenok's voice came from his left ear. "It's jammed, Joe."

"Then turn off the fucking nuke!"

"You know we can't do that." Sprague's voice, in a whisper.

"Shit." Rigges looked down at the mucker, breasts rising and falling in a deep slumber. He kicked her, felt the reassuring crack of one of her ribs breaking under his toe. "Fuck! Override, damn it! Marenok, show him how!"

"We're trying, Joe."

"Try harder!" The hostages squirmed away, faces glaring up at him, their mouths mumbling words under the duct tape over their lips. He could imagine what they were saying. "Untie us! Do something! Let us go!" Fuck 'em, goddamn lifers.

Rigges grabbed the mucker's Uzi, flicked the safety off, and sprayed a blast across the front windows of the restaurant, glass shattering nicely, bullets pinging off into the black field beyond, little splotches of energy whisking away as the repulsor dome ate the bullets.

"Rigges, cut that out!" Sprague yelled at him.

"*Get*" — he jammed another magazine in, blasted a glass cabinet of sushi to shreds — "*me*" — he continued waltzing with the little automatic, powdering the menu board — "*out*." He yanked the magazine out, slid another one in. "Please?"

The gray field disappeared, and cool air fell into the restaurant, swirling the clouds of gunpowder smoke out through the window in complex little clouds of chaos. A team of medics ran in with litters, and a bomb team dragged the mucker out and away to an armored truck. Sprague and Marenok shoved their way through a door, and Sprague held out the little box. Rigges pressed his right thumb on the little pad, the box whirred, and the little red light over his nuke went off.

"Thanks," Rigges said. He ejected the magazine on the Uzi and threw it to the floor.

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* * *

THE LITTLE spikes of her hair were backlit by the streetlight glowing in from the window, and the corona of blonde flamed like a halo. Manorek rose up off him, head cocked back, eyes closed. lips parting, slightly open, tip of tongue poking through. Her face fell down, a long strand of hair falling over her forehead, face in shadow, her hands kneading his stomach. She leaned back, face in light, light, shadow, light, and he watched her as she came down on him, her breath rising, his breath rising, him *rising, and the sores crawled up her arms and death hovered over them and they came together, one-two-three like that.*

God, it had been good, Rigges thought, that last time when he had a real body.

He rolled into the police van on repulsor waves, his eyestalks waving around the cramped space. A door slid shut behind him, and he let his mobile unit gently fall to the floor. Maronek sat stripped to her waist in a little chair before a gray locker, Sprague sitting behind her, strapping little vials of drugs to a bandolier. Crusty black sores covered her left arm and dotted her neck, and a few more sores marred her breasts, like ugly freckles. She smiled as he approached, and he flashed the little spectrum of lights across the readout screen on the front of his tin-can body, across the emotive panel that passed for his face. The van bounced slightly as the driver kicked it into drive and sped out of the police garage.

"Ready?" Rigges asked, his voice slightly metallic, but still his voice. They'd said they could make his voice sound real, just like they had said they could give him an android body that would look real — but he had said, no, don't make me sound human: make me sound like a machine. If the IDS was going to rot his body and leave him little more than a blob of brain, he didn't want an organic body anymore.

"Ready, toots," Marenok said. "Sprague, strap him on."

Rigges shut down his visual circuit when Sprague's hands came for him, and felt Sprague remove from his mobile unit *him*, the braincase — the salvageable bits of neurosystem, all that remained of Rigges. Sprague attached the curved case, like a big flattened sausage, to Marenok's stomach. "Her little fetus," they joked, because with the braincase attached, she looked about three months pregnant. The police officer connected Rigges's braincase to her neurosystem, plugging in a little cable

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to a connector above her crotch, to a bunch of nerve endings there, and then inserting a clear tube from the case to the catheter in her navel. Rigges felt the nice little glow wash over him whenever Sprague did that — when his brain joined with her body, and her endocrine system joined with his brain.

The little spikes of her hair were backlit by the streetlight glowing in from the window, and the corona of blonde flamed like a halo. . . . He sent the image to her.

Welcome aboard, Marenok said to him.

He opened up his visual circuits, looked through her eyes, and saw his mobile unit, like a little trash can with the repulsor drive on the bottom, the eyestalks on top, the emotive panel on the front above the opening where his braincase had been. Marenok stroked the tiny pins on the surface of his braincase, the sensors that allowed him to feel wind and temperature and touch, and he smiled inside her. Sprague plugged in the bandolier of drugs to an opening on Rigges's braincase. The drugs flowed through him, and Rigges monitored the flow, monitored her vital signs.

"Feeding O.K.?" Sprague asked.

"Yeah," Rigges said through her, in the low voice they agreed would be him when he spoke with her lips.

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"O.K. Let's arm you two." Sprague tapped some buttons on Rigges's mobile unit, and Rigges saw the lights flash on his tin-can body, saw his auxiliary electronic brain rumble through a random number sequence, saw Sprague plug in a cable to the little nuke at Marenok's chest, and heard the bomb go click-click clank-click. Sprague pulled out the cable, Marenok pulled a T-neck over her gear, and she put on a blue jacket. He didn't need eyes on the back of her head — *his* body had that option, of course — to read the label on the jacket back.

NEGOTIATOR.

"Let's waste 'em, baby," he said inside her.

"You got it," she said inside him.

The van slowed to a stop, the back doors whisked open, and Rigges and Marenok stepped out, minds and body together, swatting minicams aside, toward the repulsor field irising open, toward the doors of the pachinko parlor, toward the bullet-riddled windows, toward the mucker and his or her twenty-nine hostages.

Toward, Rigges hoped again, toward cool, cleansing death.

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FILMS

HARLAN ELLISON'S WATCHING

Installment 35: *In Which the Phantasmagorical Pales Before the Joys of the Mimetic*

CALL ME madcap, if you will, but I do not think it was an act either desipient or devil-may-care when the Hal Roach Studios selected *Topper*, a film made in 1937 in black and white, as the first motion picture to suffer the depredations of Colorization, Inc. in 1985. As the first toe immersed in the market waters, to see how the public responded to "classics" in this corrupted-for-tv-viewing form, they desired a film that had everything going for it. *Topper* filled that bill. It was bright, brash, still amusing after almost fifty years; it had enchanting performances by Cary Grant, Roland Young, Billie Burke, and the breathtaking Constance Bennett; it had an urbane screenplay by Jack Jerne, Eddie Moran and the then-popular though now sadly-undervalued novelist Eric Hatch, based on a sprightly Thorne Smith fantasy; and it was directed by one of the great "lost" comedy talents, Norman Z. McLeod — he of *Monkey Business, Horse Feathers, If I Had a Million, It's a Gift* and *Panama Hattie* fame . . . to recall a mere sprinkling of his more than forty credits.

Yet given even such values, it is my guess that what made *Topper* the exactly right choice to be the *vade mecum* of color-blighted films, over all other possibles, was the subject matter.

Topper is a ghost story.

And we do love our ghost stories.

From the classic *Outward Bound* in 1930 and *Berkeley Square* in 1933, the ghost story has been treated with evenhanded results ranging from sensitive (*Portrait of Jennie*, 1948) and romantic (*The Ghost and Mrs. Muir*, 1947) to coarse (*High Plains Drifter*, 1973) and imbecile (1966's *The Ghost and*

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Mr. Chicken and the unforgettable *Ghost in the Invisible Bikini*). The epic ectoplasmic has received no better treatment at the hands of the inept and venal than any other genre, but has at least logged its fair share of genuinely important entries:

• *Kwaidan* (1964): a stunning quartet of supernatural Japanese folk tales based on the classic writings of Keisumi Yakumo and extravagantly directed by Kobayashi. Outstanding among the four segments is "The Woman of the Snow" in which a frost demon comes upon a pair of travelers, freezes one to death with her breath, and spares the other on condition that he never reveal what he has seen. His fate, resting on a kept promise, becomes chancey when, later in his prosperous life, he betrays the frost demon's largesse by shooting off his mouth about the fateful night to his beautiful wife.

• *Here Comes Mr. Jordan* (1941) won Oscars for Harry Segall's original story and for Sidney Buchman's and Seton Miller's smooth as butter screenplay about a prizefighter (Robert Montgomery) who is taken to heaven before his appointed time, and the Celestial Comptroller has to correct the error by sending Montgomery back to Earth in another body. Claude Rains as the priggish angel stuck with the overseer's job is, as ever he was, no less than memorable. And if the plot sounds familiar, it may be because the movie was remade in 1978 as *Heaven Can Wait* with Warren Beatty and James Mason and Julie Christie. The '78 version is okay, but is merely a walk to '41's canter. The major difference between the versions is that the original shows none of the cynicism and smartmouth contemporizing of the Beatty-Buck Henry remake. Words like *graciousness* and *kindness* attach themselves to the original; I suppose because in 1941 we were a more naive people, and the film still had its innocence in our view. There was not the smarmy captiousness and sardonic manipulation of televangelists and scam-artists like J.Z. Knight and her trance-channeling "entity," the ever-popular ectoplasmic blabbermouth, Ramtha. (Just as a sidelight, and *absolutely* coincidentally, Ms. Knight is a multimillionaire who races racehorses. Ramtha is known to give advice to Ms. Knight's clients on how to buy racehorses . . . from Knight. Strictly a coincidence.) Oh, yes, of course, we've long been afflicted with charlatans and sleight-of-hand "spiritualists" who gulled the jejune and unworldly with promises of occult contacts to access the Beyond. To be sure, the history of psychic flapdoodle is

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chockblock with examples of unbelievable booga-booga bunco games run on the credulous: from the French dowser Aymar in 1692 who, through use of a swinging pendulum, "proved the guilt of a murderer" — a retarded nineteen-year-old hunchback, pathetically unable even to defend himself against the charge — who was subsequently "broken on the wheel," to the famous 19th Century child mediums, the Fox sisters (Kate, 6 and Margaret, 8) of Hydesville, NY, who, in 1848, not only earned more than a hundred dollars a night by contacting the dead through "rappings" that awed immense crowds (in 1888 Margaret Fox confessed in a newspaper article that she and her sister had produced the spiritual raps by cracking their toe joints, an amusement they had innocently been practicing for years till they'd conned adults into believing their rap-seances conveyed messages from The Other Side), but almost single-handedly — or more accurately -footedly — created the Spiritualist movement, to the current crop of outright fakers like Uri Geller and hordes of New Age spiritualists called "channelers" who derive their credentials from the gibberish of Shirley MacLaine. But never before in history have these scamming descendents of Cagliostro had such unlimited entree to the public consciousness, such wild-eyed cooperation from mass media. Television, supermarket tabloids, several major publishing houses devoted to the promulgation of New Age lunacy, university-sponsored seminars, uncritical reports and articles in otherwise responsible newspapers . . . we are awash in a floodtide of occultism, obscurantist beliefs, fundamentalist-backed faith in primitive superstition. And the kinder, gentler attitude toward Travelers from the Spirit Domain has been bent into the hands of the slasher-horror novelists, the cynical film producers, and those who pick the pockets of the troubled, the desolute, and the gullible.

(It occurs to me that I've lurched away from my main point. I beg your pardon. That which purposely keeps people 'stupid,' in order to fleece them and manipulate them, drives me more than a little bug-fuck. For those of you similarly passionate, I urge the buying and reading of James "The Amazing" Randi's excellent FLIM-FLAM! Available in trade paperback from Prometheus Books, with an introduction by Isaac Asimov, 234 pp., $8.95. And now, sucking my thumb in embarrassment, let us return to matters of lesser consequence.)

• *The Haunting* (1963): Shirley Jackson's impossibly brilliant THE

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HAUNTING OF HILL HOUSE, scripted by Nelson Gidding and directed by Robert Wise, remains to this day, devoid of all the special effects crutches required by a generation of wise-guy filmmakers raised on television, more terrifying than but one or two of all the films ever made. It towers above the mass of shockers and knife-kill treacheries that today inveigle the droolers and brutes who slouch out to get their daily requirement of grue.

• *I Married a Witch* (1942): A film that knocked me out when I was eight years old and saw it as a first-run B feature at a Saturday matinee at the Lake Theater in Painesville, Ohio . . . that I have been enchanted by dozens of times since . . . that I taped off cable six or seven years ago because it *continues* to knock me out. If you don't know it, you are more the barren for that lack of familiarity. Not, strictly speaking, a "ghost" movie, it nonetheless features a pair of witches, father and daughter, who were burned at the stake and whose spirits return to bedevil the descendant of the Puritan who fried them. So I don't think I'm stretching the definition too much. Based on a Thorne Smith-Norman Matson confection, condignly showcasing the exquisite performances of Fredric March, Robert Benchley, Susan Hayward and the delicious Cecil Kellaway and infinitely more delicious Veronica Lake (my very first cinema crush, petite and breathtakingly sensual with that peekaboo hairdo, the image in later years of my character Valerie Lone in "The Resurgence of Miss Ankle-Strap Wedgie") as the ghostly hexers, this was one of two saturnalian directorial outings by René Clair that should be straitjacket-and-fetters viewing requirements for any contemporary director attempting similar material. The other Clair wonder, of course, is *The Ghost Goes West* (1936) written by Robert Sherwood and starring Robert Donat, whose performances in *The 39 Steps* and *Goodbye, Mr. Chips* tend to dim the memory of how endearingly he assayed the dual roles of Murdoch and Donald Glourie.

• *The Ghost and Mrs. Muir* (1947), *The Legend of Hell House* (1973), *The Horn Blows at Midnight* (1945), *Blithe Spirit* (1945) and *The Canterville Ghost* (1944) are, in no particular order, further evidence that in years past the treatment of revenants was more gracious, was kinderhearted.

In recent memory, both *Ghostbusters* (1984) and *Poltergeist* (1982) — and to a somewhat but not much diminished degree, despite a general opinion that it was a fragmented failure — an opinion I do not share — *Poltergeist II* (1986) meet the

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standards of invention and believability and common decency toward ghosts set at such a lofty level by the noble predecessors I've noted above.

But after that recent trio (and *Foxfire*, which I forgot), we find that the telling of the ghost story in film has fallen on fumblefooted times. Even if we discount all the films allegedly set to terrify us with spectral villains and supernatural menaces, what we are dealt these days are what is called, in gin rummy circles, no-brainers.

O'Hara's Wife (1982), *Kiss Me Goodbye* (1982), *Maxie* (1985), *The Heavenly Kid* (1985), *The Wraith* (1986) and *Hello, Again* (1987) are about as dismal a collection of crap, in *any* genre, as one could possibly hack up after a lost weekend of the d.t.s and flying pink elephants.

(I purposely omit 1981's *Ghost Story* and 1988's *Beetlejuice*. The former because it is so wrongheaded and inept that it skews everything I want to say here; the latter because — don't ask me how — I simply missed seeing it.)

Each member of that sextet of relatively current filmic grotesqueries manifests similarities that, taken in sum, codify an attitude . . . a tilt of the head . . . a way of looking at . . . what has formerly been a rich, hearty, memorable and honorable medium for cinematic storytelling. An attitude better suited to lummoxes and simps.

All of which similarities, cresting the wave of ghost movies that has swamped us recently, glare forth in one consummately forgettable film, HIGH SPIRITS (Tri-Star). A film that originally I intended as the focus of this essay; a film that, I realize, as I reach this point in my ruminations, is a film so ephemeral and pointless, that merely the comparison between it and the classics I've named, says it all. Here are the maddening similarities, all present in *High Spirits*:

1. Most evident in *O'Hara's Wife* — but present in plenitude in four of the five others — is the slow-witted behavior of the protagonist(s) who can see the ghost where others cannot. You or I, confronted by a spectral manifestation, would not continue to talk to the entity others keep demonstrating by their shock at our behavior . . . they do *not* see. In *O'Hara's Wife*, a fine actor, Ed Asner, is visited by the spirit of his dead wife, played by an excellent actress, Mariette Hartley. Within minutes of her first corporeal appearance, we *and her husband* know damned well that no one else can see or hear her. Yet throughout the stupidly-written script, Asner keeps talking aloud to her, in the presence of others, causing everyone to think he's nuts, causing idiot slapstick

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contretemps that embarrass him, get him jailed, infuriate those trying to be sympathetic to him, and in general cause him to be looked on as a moron or mental defective. We are asked to identify with the protagonist, but his behavior is unworthy of a bright ten-year-old. And so everyone in the film comes off looking like a jerk, because the scenarist and director think it's cute for people to act like schmucks.

2. The ghosts have variable powers. They can do, or are unable to do, things common and uncommon, in no set pattern. There is no internal consistency, no schema that sets up a logic of spectrology that makes any sense, even in supernatural terms. Sometimes they can walk through walls, and sometimes they splatter against the walls. Sometimes they leave physical evidence of themselves, and sometimes they don't. Here now, gone in a moment. But never with any degree of logic that tells us the powers of a ghost in that specific film were thought out with any degree of rationality above the level of high-school hi-jinks and sophomoric sight-gags.

3. The ghosts are as purposeless as the people they're haunting. In *Poltergeist* we were given a touching moment in which we see the shimmering, transparent ectoplasms descending a staircase and, heartwrenchingly, one of the women says of them, "They're lost. They don't know how to find their way out." There is a purpose, thus, to *why* the ghosts are there, doing what they're doing. Not so in these six crippled efforts. And because we can empathize with the still-mortal hunger of these spirits, we come to care what happens. Not so in *High Spirits*, where the *raison d'être* of ghostly presence is never rationally or even *echt*-fantastically explicated. They seem to gibber and caper for no more sensitive purpose than to satisfy the whim of a writer-director — Neil Jordan of *Mona Lisa* and *Company of Wolves* — in way over his head. (Because it's been done so well, so many times, even those not up to the job batten on the ego-feed that they can whip out a ghost movie with one hand jammed up the anus.)

4. The ghosts act as dippy as the live folks. They seem to have acquired no insight or sense from having gone through one of the two most traumatic experiences an entity can experience. (Birth is the other one, of course.) They seem to be creatures somehow trepanned in transmogrification, their common-sense aspects to have been lobotomized. They are idiots. The pranks they play, the way they speak, the directions they give, the things they demand . . . none of it rises above

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Ron Goulart ("House of Secrets" September 1988) turns his dark wit to the future, with an eye to the plight of the rich. It is so hard to get good servants afterall . . .

The Consequences of Buying Maria Montez for Dad

By Ron Goulart

HAVING ONE OF the richest men on the face of the earth for a father was not necessarily a bed of roses. That's what Stuart Guernsey was thinking about as his skycar was whizzing its way from the West Coast to the East on Wednesday, September 23, 2020. He was a plump blond man of forty-nine with a nearly handsome, youthful face.

They claimed he still owed eighty-six thousand dollars on the face, and Stu was hoping PlazDocs, Inc., of Manhattan wouldn't try to get in touch with him on his dash pixphone during the flight home. They'd taken to showing him computer projections of what might be done to his features should he not pay up soon.

Right now, Stu wanted to reflect on what had happened at the recent meeting of the board of directors of Artillery for Tots, Inc., of which he

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was chairman. He'd thought the proposed vidspots for their Slaughterin' Susan doll were absolutely —

Brzzt! Brzzt!

Shutting his eyes, he flicked on the pixphone answering button. "Yes?"

"She's, alas, much worse."

That didn't sound like anybody at PlazDocs. Slowly and tentatively, Stu opened one eye.

It was MedAttorney Bloomshiner, a lean black man who looked to be not more than twenty-five. He was one of the legal team representing Stu's most recent former wife.

"Worse in what way, exactly?"

"As you know, Mr. Guernsey, recent laboratory tests — conducted for us at independent facilities that have no particular ax to grind — confirm that while Nancy Marie Willowbend lived as your wife from June 13, 2018, through July 4, 2020, she contracted a rare, and seemingly incurable, disease that, because of its extreme rarity, we are dubbing Guernsey's syndrome. This dread blight, which, as its name implies, she contracted from you, has —"

"Nancy Marie could just as well have caught it from the — I forget the exact total — forty-seven or so other guys she slept with during our brief idyll. Why don't you folks call it Gomez the Gardener's syndrome, or Ned the Postman's blight, or even That Oily Bastard on the Space Shuttle's disease, or possibly —"

"What I propose to do now, Mr. Guernsey, is show you a vidfilm of your wife in her current pitiable condition. Then I will simply ask you how you can, even with the hard heart we know you possess, bear to let this poor child suff—"

"Child? She's thirty-eight. That's not exactly the first blush of —"

"To heighten the emotional impact of the footage, which we may eventually have to screen in a court of law, unless you agree to be honorable and assume the full financial burden of maintaining this —"

"No more money."

"We'll be forwarding you the bill for the production costs of this poignant little film. It lasts just three and one half minutes, yet packs an emotional wallop that is amazing," continued Bloomshiner. "The total cost is $4.6 million."

"Four point six million? Holy Mother of God, I can make three Slaugh-

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terin' Susan commercials for that and have enough left over to film an entire episode of 'Baby Gunn' for—"

"Let me break down the cost a bit. Mood music: $380,000. That's quite a bargain, considering we were able to hire the composer Neji Kwagaku, one of Japan's leading musicians, to do the job of writing the score. The music itself was played by the Berlin Senior Citizens Retirement Enclave Symphony Orchestra, under the direction of Ulrich Schraube. That came to only an additional $470,000—"

"Bloomshiner, take this up with *my* attorneys."

"They claim they won't represent you anymore unless you pay something on the $760,000 you still owe them on your earlier divorces. So—"

Stu flipped the hang-up switch. Then he punched out the number of the Skycar Phone Service.

After sixteen rings, a dented robot, scrawled over with Spanish-language graffiti, appeared on the small image screen. "Yeah?"

"You guys are supposed to keep out calls I don't want. But yesterday and today I've been getting abused by several of the people I put on the list for you to—"

"Hold it, hold it, buddy. Give me your phone ID number, and I'll look this up."

Sighing, Stu told the robot, "Never mind." He hung up, aware he owed them something like eighty-seven thousand dollars.

Brzzt! Brzzt!

Stu ignored it. He attempted to distract himself by watching the view below through the glazbottom of his flying car.

But he was passing over the Dustbowl II area now. There was nothing to see down there but gritty, desolate farmland and a few stragglers who were late in getting away. Also some dead animals that might be cows. Hard to tell from five thousand feet, especially with the magnifying gadget on the blink.

He answered the phone on the thirty-fifth buzz. "Yes?"

"Keep in mind, Mr. Guernsey, that it's best to look on the bright side," said the grinning, thickset man on the phone screen. He was forty, tanned, fit, wearing a tailored sky-blue paramilitary outfit.

"Geez, what's wrong now, Wiggs?"

"I wish, sir, you could find it in your heart to address me as Captain

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Wiggs. I am, after all, a full-fledged captain in the NoCal RecArea Private Patrol, and —"

"Jeez, what's wrong now, Captain Wiggs?"

"Your ski chalet in the Tahoe Enclave is still standing."

"That's good news. Even though I had no reason to suspect it wasn't."

"Oh, then you haven't heard about the meteor showers?"

"I've been down in SoCal on busin— what meteor showers?"

Captain Wiggs held his tanned thumb and his tanned forefinger about an inch apart. "Little meteors for the most part. Yet capable, especially the batch that hit your chalet roof last night, of doing damage." He chuckled, grinned. "A new roof is going to set you back only $360,000."

"I paid only $960,000 for the whole damn chalet."

"That shows you that real estate continues to be a good investment. Keeps appreciating. Even the roof appreciates."

"O.K., get it repaired, Captain. Contact the Macri Roofing Company, and tell them to bill me when —"

"I already contacted them, and they refused, sir. In fact, old Macri himself came on the pixie and made a sign with his hand that is either lewd or a death threat."

"See if you can get somebody else to do it, Captain. On credit." He hung up.

Another batch of dead cows down below.

Brzzt! Brzzt!

"What now? Oh, hello, Spud."

It was his brother, slim and handsome and eight years his senior. "This is about Dad."

"Is he . . . dead?"

"No such luck," answered Spud with a rueful smile. "But I've been talking with the mediteam that looks after the old bastard. They tell me he ought to have, while he's getting over that last bout of flu, a full-time nurse to —"

"Dad's got a whole damn mansion full of servants, human and android, there in Connecticut to look after —"

"Actually, he doesn't," said Spud. "Dad went through another purge two days ago, fired them all. Even Mrs. Shokus this time."

"Mrs. Shokus? Damn, Spud, she nursed me through that food-poisoning attack way back when I was eight."

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"Yep, and that's one of the things he holds against her. The point is, Dad's agreed to let an android nurse come into the place. So meet me in the Manhattan showrooms of Guardian Medibots tomorrow at two in the afternoon, and we'll pick one out."

"Yes, O.K."

"I hear it didn't go well in SoCal?"

"Not especially. Listen, Spud, could you loan me, say, something like—"

"Nope. I'm in worse financial shape than you are, buddy," replied his brother. "Things haven't been going well for me since Dad put me in charge of FakeFoods, Unlimited. Well, no use going into all that's wrong with FoneyBurgers and that government report that they cause mutagenic—"

"Even a hundred thousand dollars would help, Spud."

"Ain't got it to spare, buddy. For one thing, Helga, Olga, and two of my other erstwhile wives have teamed up and formed something they call the International Reimbursement Foundation. Dedicated to collecting back alimony from me. And, well, I've been doing a bit of gambling again lately."

"Didn't you swear an oath to Dad that you'd never again gamble or even flip a coin or—"

"I did that, yes. The thing is, buddy, I seem to owe these people $3.6 million. They call themselves Mafia-Ninja Enterprises, and unless I pay at least 10 percent of the tab within thirty days. . . .They've been showing me computer projections of what my corpse is going to look like."

"Unsettling, isn't it? I'm having similar problems with a plastic surgeon."

"You should've had them take off that extra chin while they were at it."

"I can't even get the phone people to stop that sort of—"

"Meet me in the Apple at two tomorrow," cut in his brother. He gave him a sly smile, one that Stu had seen often over the years. "And be of good cheer, buddy. There may just be a way to solve all our problems, especially the financial ones."

"Huh?"

"Tell you when I see you." The screen blanked.

Stu sat, slightly slumped in his seat, and didn't answer any further calls for the remainder of the flight.

The Guardian Medibot showrooms were up on Pedlevel 7 above 5thAv.

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Spud was already there, slowly circling an efficient-looking male-nurse android, when Stu got there.

"Late," mentioned Spud. "And why are you limping?"

"I kicked the vidwall, over in my townhouse on Safe ParkAv."

"Any particular reason?"

"Nancy Marie got an intrude order, and a vidfilm showing the alleged effects of life with me started running endlessly on the —"

"I warned you about marrying a woman with little beady eyes."

"Her eyes aren't beady, Spud. She was, after all, Miss America in 1999."

"Proving that you can have beady eyes and still rise in this country, especially if you have tits the size of —"

"Another reason I'm limping is that I fell out of the skycab, since it didn't dock exactly level with the —"

"Where's your own car?"

"Somebody claiming to be from the Berlin Senior Citizens Retirement Enclave Symphony took it in lieu of payment." Sinking, Stu sat on the pedestal that held the android nurse. "Here we are, the sole heirs of the man who is the president, chairman of the board, and founder of WarTex, Inc., the most successful producer of both conventional and unconventional weapons in the world — and we're both having money problems. Of course, in your case, Spud, it's understandable, since you gamble and —"

"Our money worries are just about at an end." His brother smiled, settled down next to him on the yellow plaz pedestal.

"Being the son of Ralph Guernsey has been, for the most part, a burden. When I was in college — all six of 'em — they razzed me because that was when Dad was known as the Man Who Defoliated Brazil, and —"

"You're not attending. Our financial problems are on the brink of vanishing."

"You've been saying that for many years, Spud. Back when Dad turned eighty, you predicted he couldn't live more than a few months, and then we'd inherit untold billions. That was, remember, seven long years ago, and —"

"Casually," cut in Spud, "glance across the room. Note the pudgy chap stationed near that blonde nurse andy."

"I see him. So?"

"That's Lincoln Brownmiller, the fellow in charge of this branch of Guardian Medibots."

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"He's probably better off financially than we are."

"That he is, chiefly because of a sideline he has," said Spud, lowering his voice. "Brownmiller can arrange — and it's completely foolproof — he can alter whatever andy we select to look after Dad."

"Alter it how? Don't the damn things work when —"

"Modify it, in an absolutely undetectable way. His fee is a bit stiff — $1.5 million," Spud went on. "But he'll wait until Dad passes on, and we —"

"Why should we pay him? . . ." Stu, pressing his right palm to his plump chest, stood up. "Are you hinting that this guy rigs these damn androids so they —"

"I'm not hinting, buddy; I'm stating it." Spud stood, too. "It's been done successfully before — Brownmiller confided several specific cases to me. Been done in such a way that nobody — not the police, not attorneys, not the media — nobody has tumbled. And the few times there was any suspicion at all, nothing could be proved. So we select an android nurse here, one that'll get along with Dad, and —"

"Nobody gets along with Dad."

"Relatively speaking. Then the Medibot, this angel of mercy, it helps Dad on to glory." Spud smiled carefully. "It will look like — oh, that he maybe had an accidental fall or simply passed away in his sleep. As of the moment, we are the only two mentioned in Dad's will. Once he's gone, we —"

"No." Stu shook his head, his breathing out of kilter. "We can't do anything like —"

"Listen to you, wheezing away. That's entirely due to the way Dad treated you as a kid." Spud took hold of his brother's arm. "I'm telling you, we now have the chance to get out of the hole, to have sufficient money at last. You can pay off Nancy Mae for —"

"Nancy Marie." He pulled clear of his brother.

"The one with the beady eyes, whatever her name is. The point is —"

"Nope, no. I can't go along." He started toward the glaz doors.

"Stu."

"What?"

His brother caught up with him. "I'd appreciate it if you didn't mention this to anyone, especially to Dad."

Stu didn't look at him. "I haven't mentioned much of anything to Dad

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in several years." He walked out of the showrooms.

STU GOT his skycar back two days later, with the help of the Artillery of Tots attorneys he persuaded to help him. Just in time to fly back to SoCal for another meeting on the vidcommercials for the Xmas season. He traveled westward via a different route, since passing over Dustbowl II depressed him.

He was zipping along over New Mexico, when Captain Wiggs pix-phoned him. "I don't want to hear any more disasters," he said before the NoCal RecArea Private Patrol officer could speak.

Shaking his head and smiling, Wiggs said, "This isn't all bad, sir."

"But it's partially bad?"

"Only the part about fixing up Olaf. And even there you'll be out only about fifty-six thousand dollars."

"Who is Olaf?"

"The fellow who was patching up the roof of your ski chalet."

"You got somebody who —"

"Olaf was willing to undertake the chore on spec," explained the uniformed captain. "See, there was a rumor going around the Tahoe Enclave area that he was suffering from vertigo. That sort of talk doesn't help a roofer's reputation any, and times have been lean for Olaf as —"

"They are lean for me as well," said Stu, looking down and noticing that whatever it was he was flying over was on fire. "Did Olaf fall off my roof?"

"He did, yes," admitted Wiggs. "Only, you'll be happy to hear he didn't take his tumble until after he'd patched up almost all the meteor damage."

"I'm expected to pay his hospital bills?"

"It would be a nice gesture, sir. Olaf didn't have any insurance, since it's tough for a dizzy roofer to —"

"Send Olaf a get-well card, and let him sue us." Stu ended the call.

Brzzt! Brzzt!

"What now?"

"You've got to learn to relax, buddy. Your little beady eyes are popping out of your puffy face like —"

"It's Nancy Marie who has beady eyes, not me."

"Well, there's something we agree on, anyway," said his brother from the phone screen. "Listen, I have some bad news."

"Dad's dead."

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"No, and that'd come under the heading of good news, anyway. What it is, he's decided he doesn't want a Medibot to look after him."

Stu's breathing had been clouding up, but it got better again, "That means you and Brownmiller can't rig an andy to —"

"We can chat about that later." Spud frowned. "Dad now insists the only thing he wants inside the mansion with him is a nurse android manufactured by an outfit called Starline Robotics. Heard of them?"

"Sure, they make androids who're replicas of celebrities, past and present."

"That's them. Dad has the notion he has to have something from their 1940s collection. All Dad's medical people assure me the Starline nurses, even though they look like last-century movie actresses, are reliable."

"Let's get him one of those, then. Soon as I get back to Manhattan, we can —"

"Rather take care of it today, buddy. Take a look at the pictures that are coming onto the screen," said his brother. "Here's one of the ones Dad is especially fond of, apparently. Maria Montez. These are all movie actresses from the 1940s, remember. Meaning Dad would've seen them back when he was going through puberty. Starline says most old farts like to be looked after by andies resembling the actresses they yearned for in their youth."

"She's a little sinister-looking, isn't she?"

"Most of the others seem bland to me." A blonde android appeared. "This one is . . . what's her name? Oh yeah, this is the Louise Albritton model. And this next one is pretty close. June Vincent. Then there's Gail Russell. Looks a bit nervous to me. This one is . . . let's see . . . Dorothy Lamour."

"She's nice. If I were picking one, I'd —"

"Dad's more inclined toward Maria Montez."

"O.K., go with Maria Montez, then."

"I'll buy one for Dad this very day."

Stu hesitated, then said, "Spud, this Starline outfit . . . they don't operate like Medibot, do they? There isn't a Brownmiller who'll rig —"

"Not at all," his brother assured him. "After talking to you the other day . . . well, I realized how goofy I was getting. No, you don't have to worry. Maria Montez will do nothing more than take care of Dad."

* * *

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Olaf had done a pretty good job on the ski chalet roof before his plunge. In the den, where Stu was working with one of his more discreet computer terminals at trying to keep his creditors at bay, there were only two small holes in the ceiling. Wind-driven snow got in through them, hit the warm air of the circsystem, and melted with a faint sizzling sound. Drops of warm water then came plummeting down, hitting at the maroon thermocarpet with a quiet slurp. There was a plate-sized damp spot over near the base of the robobartender, another behind the hip-hugger desk chair Stu was crouched in. He'd been here nearly three days, lying low. Thus far he'd done little skiing.

"That's a hell of a wind," he said aloud, pushing back in his tin chair and glancing toward the big, blanked view window of the den.

"Shall I turn it down?" inquired the room's control box.

"I'm not hearing the real wind?"

"Only partially. We're enhancing it to add to the feeling of coziness."

"Turn it off altogether."

"We can replace it with warm, crackling fireplace noises."

"Silence," suggested Stu, getting up. "From you, too."

"Very well. I know nothing if not my place."

The den became quiet.

"Ahum," ventured the computer terminal after a moment.

Stu was near the window, staring at its milky opaqueness. "In a minute," he muttered.

He tried pacing, mostly between the damp patches on the thick carpeting.

"I ought to phone him," he said.

"Beg pardon?" said the room controls.

"What, sir?" said the terminal.

"Nothing. Hush up."

Stu halted at the center of the room. He clicked his teeth together, concentrated on keeping his lips pressed shut.

"O.K., if I pixphone Dad," he asked himself, "what'll I tell him?"

He could warn him that Spud was anxious for him to die, and to keep his eyes on Maria Montez.

"Dad'll just call me names, say I was making it up to hurt Spud."

Besides, Spud had promised him that the android nurse who was looking after Dad was completely trustworthy and hadn't been modified.

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Even so, though, Stu was uneasy.

"What a nitwit relationship I have with my damn father. When I can't even warn him that he's in danger of—"

"Beg pardon?" said the control box.

"Thinking aloud again, sorry." He sighed, with a touch of a wheeze, and returned to face the computer terminal.

Better to just keep quiet about the whole business.

"You oughtn't to let your truly horrendous financial shape get you down, sir," advised the terminal, adding a cheerful tone to its metallic voice. "Your brother, I can assure you, is in much worse a state. And he has collectors and loan sharks from fully a dozen countries hot on his—"

"Back to work," said Stu.

Stu broke his leg on the same day his father died.

He was still holed up at the chalet, where he'd been staying for nearly two weeks now.

During breakfast the pixphone screen that floated over the dining area table flashed to life, and there was Spud, tears touching his handsome face. "Brace yourself, buddy," he said.

"What's wrong?"

"It's Dad. He passed away this morning."

"From what?"

"Natural causes, of course. It'll take awhile before his will, which he didn't live to change, is—"

"Change his will? I never heard Dad was thinking about—"

"Some of the harsher aspects of reality I shield you from, buddy. That's what older brothers are—"

"Why exactly was he going to change his will, Spud?"

"Oh, he had some crackbrained notion we had proved to be unworthy of carrying on the—"

"Are you certain you didn't rig that Maria Montez android to—"

"Grief makes you quite a putz," his brother told him. "As a matter of fact, Maria was in tears after discovering the old boy dead in bed. 'Hee was one teerifc gentlemans,' she sobbed to me."

"I'd like to look her over when I get back there."

"I'm keeping her on as part of the staff, so that'll be easy. The funeral is in four days."

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"I'll be there."

"Just keep in mind that our financial worries are over."

"See you at the wake," Stu clicked off.

Leaving the table, he paced the dining room.

There ought to be a way to check over that android, determine if it had actually killed his father.

"Spud swears an andy can be rigged to kill and leave no traces."

But if he could prove it. That would certainly take care of Spud, and mean that eventually Dad's entire fortune would come to Stu.

"Shall I bus the breakfast things, sir?" inquired the table.

"Might as well." He moved toward an exit ramp. "I'm going skiing. Helps me think."

The skiis tangled themselves up somehow.

Stu was an excellent skier. Even his Dad had admitted that. "Only thing that asshole can do right is ski," he'd said once.

But he fell anyway, on a steeply slanting slope. He heard his leg breaking in two places, and then he passed out.

He awakened in the snow ambulance on the way back to his chalet.

By midafternoon, Stu was, with a lightweight plazcast on his right leg from ankle to knee, propped up in his floating bed in the master bedroom and alone again in his chalet.

Somebody'd unblanked the bedroom window. All you could see outside was a white hillside and lightly falling snow.

Stu dozed off.

At twilight a gentle tapping sound on the door.

He awakened, blinking. He called out, "Yes?"

The neowood door swung slowly inward. A very pretty, dark-haired android stepped across the threshold. "Hi, I'm Dorothy Lamour," she said, smiling at him. "Your brother sent me out to look after you."

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SCIENCE

ISAAC ASIMOV

THE IMPORTANCE OF PITCH

WHEN I was 22, I married a beautiful damsel. (She was not my present dear wife, Janet, but that's another story.)

I was a little nervous about it. After all, I was neither handsome nor athletic nor wealthy nor sophisticated nor many other things that were likely to be attractive to women, and I was dreadfully afraid that the young woman would suddenly realize this.

I knew that I was intelligent, but I wasn't sure if that particular quality was very apparent (we had only known each other a few months) or, if it was, that it was of any importance. It seemed to me, then, that I must lose no chance to do something spectacular with it, something that might impress her.

Consequently, during our honeymoon at a mountain resort hotel, when it was announced one day that there would be a quiz contest that evening and that volunteers would be welcome, my hand went up at once.

I didn't think there was the chance of a snowball in Hades that I would fail to win and this would be bound to impress my new wife.

That night, I was third in line, and, after the first two people had answered their questions, I stood up for my turn. At once the audience broke into spontaneous laughter. They hadn't laughed at the first two contestants, but I was very anxious, you see, and when I am anxious my face takes on a look that is even more intensely stupid than the one it wears in repose. So they laughed.

(My wife, who was in the audience, winced noticeably.)

The master of ceremonies then said, "Use the word 'pitch' in various sentences in such a way as to demonstrate five different meanings of the word."

The look of anxiety on my face grew more pronounced and the

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audience responded with wild hilarity. I paid no attention and merely collected my thoughts. When the laughter died down, I said, as loudly and as clearly as I could, "John pitched the pitch-covered ball as intensely as though he were fighting a pitched battle, while Mary, singing in a high-pitched voice, pitched a tent."

And then, in the dead silence that followed, I said (with a sly grin, I'm afraid), "One sentence does it."

Of course, I went on to win the contest and greatly impressed my wife. Interestingly enough, the affair won me considerable hostility from all the other guests. I gathered that there was a widespread feeling that I had no right to look so stupid without actually *being* stupid.

The reason I mention this now is that that little adventure of nearly half a century ago popped into my mind when I began to plan an essay in which I intended to describe how pitch (in the fourth sense used in that sentence of mine) told us a great deal about the size and the age of the Universe.

Let's start with sound.

Sound is produced when something vibrates. As it moves in one direction, it compresses the air in the region into which it moves and rarefies it in the direction away from which it moves. Then it reverses direction in the course of its vibration, and the reverse happens. As the vibration continues, a large number of successive compressions are formed, with each one moving away from the sound source at the natural speed of molecular movement, given the temperature, pressure, and so on.

Sound, therefore, is a series of alternating compressions and rarefactions which, on striking the eardrum, causes it to vibrate after the fashion of the original vibration that set up the pattern. Through a complex series of physiological adaptations, the eardrum vibration is carried to the brain, which interprets what it receives as sound.

The compression-rarefaction alternation can be considered a wave-form, and the distance from one compressed region to the next is the wavelength.

Ordinary objects, when set to vibrating, produce a vast complex of vibrations that, in turn, produce waves of a vast range of wavelengths that melt together in confused complexity to produce what our brain interprets as "noise."

There are objects, however, that will vibrate in relatively simple fashion and will produce sounds of a very small range of wavelengths. The brain interprets the result as a musical note, which is much more pleasant than noise is. By trial and

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error, primitive men discovered devices that made pleasant sounds, and it is combinations of these sounds that we call music.

The first scientific investigations of sound that we know of were carried out by the Greek philosopher Pythagoras (560-480 B.C.), who plucked strings of different length. He discovered that long strings also produced deeper sounds than short strings did. In other words, differences in vibration (a physical fact) produced difference in pitch (a physiological interpretation).

Pitch also changes as the source of the sound moves toward you or away from you, but this was not an easy thing to notice, prior to the 19th century.

In the first place, the change in pitch is greater as the speed of the sound source increases, and in earlier centuries very few things moved quickly enough while producing enough sound to make the change in pitch noticeable.

Secondly, ordinary sound is noisy, and the complexity of the wave form is such that it isn't easy to tell change in pitch.

Perhaps you could tell the difference in pitch if someone on a galloping horse approached you, passed you, and moved away from you, and if the rider were blowing a horn at a particular note all of the time. That, you must admit, is not a likely combination of circumstances.

In the 1840's, however, railroads were being built in western Europe and in the United States. Trains of cars would chug along at a fair rate of speed, and in order to warn people to get out of the way, they had a one-note whistle which was sounded wildly when the train approached places where it was likely to encounter people.

That meant one thing became very noticeable. If you watched a train approaching while it was whistling its head off, you couldn't help but hear, as it passed you, that the whistle dropped suddenly and sharply in pitch.

To someone *on* the train, the whistle sounds a pitch that is lower than the pitch would seem to be to the person who was watching the train approaching, but higher than the pitch would seem to be to the person who was watching the train receding. What's more, to the person on the train, the pitch would remain constant.

Thus, suppose two people are standing near the railroad track and are a mile apart. The train is moving on the track between the two people. It has passed and is receding from the first person, and is approaching the second person. A person on the train hears the

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whistle at a certain pitch. The person who has already been passed hears it at a lower pitch than that, while the person who is still being approached hears it at a higher pitch than that. The three observers all report a different pitch at the same moment.

Why is that? Actually, the reason is very simple and I suspect that Pythagoras would have been able to figure it out, had they had trains with whistles in his day.

The reason was advanced in 1842 by the Austrian physicist Christian Johann Doppler (1803-1853). He reasoned in this fashion.

Suppose a train is at rest relative to an observer; that is, both the train and the observer are not moving at all, or the observer is on a moving train so that both are moving at precisely the same speed. In that case, the train's whistle sends out pulses of compression with regularity and you hear one unchanging pitch.

But suppose the train is approaching you. The whistle sends out a wave of compression toward you. But the train is also approaching you so that the second wave of compression is released more closely to the first than would have been the case had the train been standing still. And the next wave is released more closely to the one before, and so on. All the waves of compression are closer together than they would have been if the train had been standing still. That means that the wavelength is longer and you perceive the pitch as being lower.

Doppler proceeded to work out a mathematical relationship that connected the pitch with the speed at which the sound source was approaching or receding. This meant that from the change in pitch, a person could tell whether a train was approaching or receding, and at just what speed it was doing so.

The change in pitch with speed and direction of motion is therefore called the "Doppler effect."

In 1848, the French physicist Armand Hippolyte Louis Fizeau (1819-1896) pointed out that the Doppler effect was not confined to sound alone. Any wave-form would show a similar effect and, in particular, light would. This generalization is sometimes called the "Doppler-Fizeau effect," but Fizeau generally gets cheated because the lazy way out is to save two syllables by continuing to call it a Doppler effect even when it is applied to light.

Of course, light as we usually see it (from the Sun, from stars, from a kerosene lamp, from an incandescent bulb) is a complex set of waves of different wavelengths; some wavelengths being so long or

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so short that we don't see them at all. Ordinary light, then, is analogous to what we call noise in connection with sound.

If a ray of light consisted of a single wavelength, that wavelength would shorten if the light source were approaching you, and lengthen if the light source were receding from you. Just as a particular wavelength of sound changes pitch as it lengthens or shortens, so a particular wavelength of light changes color as it lengthens or shortens.

Light of long wavelength is red. As the wavelength shortens, the color changes gradually through ranges of orange, yellow, green, blue and violet in that order, the whole being referred to as the "light spectrum." Hence, if a wavelength of light lengthens because the source is receding from you, its color shifts toward the red end of the spectrum and this is called a "red shift." If the wavelength shortens because the source is approaching you, its color shifts toward the violet end of the spectrum. This should be called a "violet shift," but scientists speak of it as a "blue shift" for reasons that pass my understanding.

But light sources that emit not one but a vast range of wavelengths would not ordinarily produce a noticeable shift at all. All the wavelengths would move toward the red or toward the violet. If they moved toward the red, some would fall off the red end, so to speak, and become invisible, while other wavelengths, ordinarily too short to be seen, would lengthen sufficiently to appear at the violet end of the spectrum. The same is true in reverse, if the wavelengths are all moving toward the violet end. In either case, what you actually see doesn't change much.

We can make an analogy. Imagine there's a long featureless rod and that you can only see a small portion of it through a six-inch wide slit. If the rod shifts in one direction or the other, you would continue to see only a small portion of it and, since it is featureless, you would not be able to tell how far it had shifted, or even in which direction.

If, on the other hand, there were some sort of mark on the rod, then you would at once tell the direction and extent of the shift, by noting the change in position of the marking.

As it happens, there *are* markings in light. In 1814, the German physicist Joseph von Fraunhofer (1767-1826) first noted that the Solar spectrum contained numbers of dark lines. These represented missing wavelengths of light in an otherwise continuous spectrum, because the Sun's atmosphere ab-

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sorbs those wavelengths. Each dark line exists in a certain fixed place in the spectrum.

If the light source is approaching and all the wavelengths shift toward the violet, then the dark lines also shift toward the violet. If the light source is receding, then the dark lines shift toward the red. By observing the positions of various dark lines, one can tell whether the light source is approaching or receding, and at what speed it is doing so.

What's more, the determination is distance independent. It doesn't matter whether an object is nearby, or is a few million miles away, or is a few million light-years away. if a spectrum can be taken and the position of the dark lines noted that is all you need.

But there's a difficulty. Sound moves quite slowly, only 0.331 kilometers per second (or 741 miles per hour). A train that is going at the moderate speed of 20 miles per hours is going at 2.7 percent the speed of sound, and that is sufficient to produce a noticeable change in pitch.

Light, on the other hand, travels about 300,000 kilometers per second (186,000 miles per second) or just about a million times as fast as sound. If a light source were moving at 50 kilometers per second (31 miles per second), that would still be less than 1/50 of 1 percent of the speed of light, and that would produce only a very small shift in the dark lines of the spectrum.

It was not till 1868 that the British astronomer William Huggins (1824-1910) was able to study the spectrum of Sirius in sufficient detail to be able to note that there was a tiny red-shift in its lines. Sirius was moving away from us at a brisk speed.

Over the next fifty years, the spectra of more and more stars were studied, and the "radial motion" of each, whether toward us or away from us, was determined and the speed of approach or recession estimated. The coming of photography was a crucial help in these studies since spectra could be taken through long term exposures that couldn't possibly be seen by eye, and the position of the lines could be determined at leisure.

It turned out that some stars were approaching us, and some were receding from us. Certain regularities in these motions were eventually analyzed and showed us that the Galaxy was rotating about its center and allowed us to get an idea of the speed of rotation.

That's a pretty impressive result to arise out of something that began with the behavior of train whistles, but that is only the beginning.

* * *

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In 1912, the American astronomer Vesto Melvin Slipher (1875-1969) managed to study the spectrum of what was then called the "Andromeda nebula." From the position of the dark lines in its spectrum, he found that it was approaching us at a speed of 200 kilometers per second. That did not seem out of line. Radial velocities of over 100 kilometers per second were unusually high, but not distressingly so.

(We know today that part of the velocity is not to be attributed to a true approach of the Andromeda. Actually, the Andromeda is a distant galaxy, something not known in 1912. The rotation of our Galaxy is, at the moment, carrying us toward Andromeda. If the effect measured relative to the center of the Galaxy, it is found to be approaching us at a velocity of only about 50 kilometers per second.)

By 1917, things began to seem really puzzling, however. Slipher had gone on to measure the radial velocity of a total of fifteen nebulae that resembled Andromeda in having a spiral form. On the basis of sheer chance, one might have expected that half of them would be approaching and half receding. Instead, the Andromeda and one other galaxy were approaching, while the other thirteen were receding.

Actually, this was more puzzling than Slipher knew at the time. All the spiral nebulae he studied were actually distant galaxies. The two that were approaching were relatively close to us and were part of the "Local Group" — a cluster of galaxies, including our own Galaxy and the Andromeda, all held together by gravitational forces, and all revolving about the center of gravity of the entire Group. Each one would be approaching us at one epoch in the history of the Universe and receding from us at another.

The other thirteen, which are *not* part of the Local Group, are all receding from us, which is a peculiar coincidence. They might move in response to gravity through still larger orbits and also might be receding at some times and approaching at others. Slipher might just have happened to measure this particular bunch of thirteen galaxies at a time when each one was in the recession phase of its orbit. That is really unlikely, but not entirely impossible. You *might* toss a coin thirteen times and end up with thirteen tails just as a matter of chance.

What was more disturbing was the radial velocity of the thirteen. Their recession was at an average velocity of 640 kilometers per second. While 200 kilometers per second could be swallowed, 640 kilo-

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meters per second was very difficult to accept. It was much greater than the radial velocities of the stars about us.

Slipher continued to measure radial velocities of more and more nebulae and found that, without exception, they all showed red-shifts and were therefore receding from us.

In the 1920's, the nebulae were finally identified as distant galaxies and, in part, that eased the situation. The galaxies were objects that were completely different from the ordinary stars about us, and it might well be normal for them to move much more quickly relative to other galaxies than for a star within a particular galaxy to be moving relative to other stars within that same galaxy.

But there remained the sticking point: Why should all those radial velocities be recessions? Shouldn't there be at least *one* galaxy outside the Local Group that was approaching us? You might think there should be — but there wasn't.

Things just continued to get worse. The American astronomer Milton LaSalle Humason [1891-1972] carried on Slipher's work. he took photographic exposures that lasted for days, so that spectra could be recorded for fainter and fainter galaxies. When he did so, he discovered velocities of recession that made earlier observations seem piddling in comparison. In 1928, he photographed a galaxy that was receding from us at 3,800 kilometers per second, which is 1.25 percent of the speed of light. By 1936, he was clocking velocities of 40,000 kilometers per second, 13 percent that of light. And *still* only recessions showed up. No approaches.

Why should this universal recession take place? Could it be that the red-shift did not signify a recession? Could it be produced by other factors?

For instance, could light travelling long distances simply lose energy? If it does, it would naturally shift toward the red, since the longer the wavelength, the smaller the energy content of the light. In that case, there would be no reason to suppose the galaxies were receding at all. The light was merely getting "tired."

The trouble with that is that physicists don't know of any process that would allow light to lose energy merely by passing through space. Besides, if it did lose energy in that fashion, then light, travelling even fairly short distances, ought to get very slightly tired, and lose a tiny bit of energy. This should be detectable in studying objects within our own Galaxy and perhaps even within our own Solar system — but the effect has

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never been detected.

Again, the reverse might be true. Instead of the galaxies being very distant objects that are moving slowly, they might indeed be moving quickly, but they might be relatively nearby and they might be small objects and not galaxies at all. Perhaps they are objects that have been shot out of the few galaxies that *do* exist, perhaps even out of our own. They might be moving at very high velocities, but that wouldn't mean they were far away — they had merely been shot out with huge energies.

This has been made to seem more plausible in recent years when it has been discovered that some galaxies are very active and have centers where enormous energies are released. Perhaps these can explode and eject matter.

If they do, however, it seems to pass the bounds of credibility that all the expelled masses are moving away from us. Perhaps that is because those masses that were moving toward us have passed us and are now moving away from us. But that doesn't help. Surely, there must be at least *one* bit of matter that was shot out in our direction and has not yet passed us, *one* object that seems to be a galaxy and is approaching us.

But there isn't, outside our own Local Group. Not one.

Astronomers have simply failed to account for the red shift in any plausible way except by means of the good old Doppler effect. The galaxies are simply receding from us, and at incredible velocities.

The American astronomer Edwin Powell Hubble (1889-1953), who was working along with Humason, tried to estimate the distances of various galaxies. The nearest ones had certain variable stars called "Cepheids" that could be made out individually. From their period of variation, it was possible to calculate their luminosity — how much light they emitted. From that and from their apparent brightness in the sky one could calculate their distance, which would also be the distance of the galaxy that contained them.

If a galaxy was so far away that no cepheid variables were bright enough to be made out, some supergiant stars could be. Assuming that such supergiant stars would be as luminous as those in nearer galaxies, the distance of the distant galaxies could be worked out.

If a galaxy is so far away that no stars at all can be made out, Hubbell went by the luminosity of the entire galaxy, assuming that the dimmer it was, the farther away it was.

Having estimated the distances of a number of galaxies, Hubble checked each with the velocity of

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recession that had been calculated for it. He found that, on the whole, the velocity of recession of a particular galaxy was directly proportional to its distance from us.

This means that if galaxy A is x times the distance of galaxy B, then galaxy A is receding at x times the velocity of galaxy A.

This is called "Hubble's Law."

The most atonishing feature of Hubble's Law, which makes it appear that all the galaxies are moving away from us, the farther the faster, can be expressed by the simple question, "Why, from *us*?"

Back in 1935, the science fiction writer Edmond Hamilton (1904-1977) published a story entitled "The Accursed Galaxy," which gave a very interesting explanation.

Hamilton suggested that, originally, all the galaxies had been comparatively close together and were very nearly at rest relative to each other, except for orbital velocities enforced by gravitational constraints.

But then, in one particular galaxy (our own, of course) life somehow developed. This was a serious galactic disease that looked as though it would rapidly spread through the Milky Way, infecting every region and passing on to any other galaxies that were too close.

All the other galaxies, in wild panic, have been fleeing from us ever since, and those that managed to achieve higher speeds managed to make it farther away in the time since the infection appeared.

This is a delightfully ingenious notion that one might almost feel ought to be true because it is so pretty, but, of course, it is just fantasy. It attributes a *purpose* to the recession, and that's outside the rules of the game of science. Things should happen only in blind obedience to the laws of nature.

Let us then carry on with the problem of the receding galaxies next month.

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P. E. Cunningham has written several very popular stories about the telepathic, dragon-like creatures known as pteros and their relationship to the humans who come to their planet. This completely independent new story concerns two students — one human, one ptero — who move the talent to dizzying new heights — and depths . . .

PURPOSE

By P. E. Cunningham

"NOW TELL ME," TEACHER Davidson said, "what is the purpose of Zorn's Keep? Student Terrell."

Lost in pleasant memories, Peter heard neither Hezekiel's question nor the lecture that had preceded it. His thoughts lounged on a shaded bank, gazing into the riverdeep eyes of a girl named Sarah. She leaned toward him; her lips parted, moist and inviting. . . .

"Student Terrell!" The thunder of Hezekiel's voice snapped Peter back to the roof with jarring abruptness. He glanced up to find the Historian's glare fixed balefully upon him. "Answer the question, Student Terrell. You *did* hear the question, didn't you?"

"Um . . . I. . . ."

He wanted to know the purpose of Zorn's Keep, a low mental voice prompted. Peter winced; surely the whole class had heard that. But as he darted his eyes from one face to another, he saw only bored expressions,

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even an unsmothered yawn. If his classmates had picked up that surreptitious telepathic hint, they hid it well.

"Student Terrell, I'm waiting for an answer."

Peter stood. "The purpose of the Keep," he recited, "is to provide training for the psi talents of Canaan, as well as regular schooling for the nontalented. The Keep was founded by Great Zorn himself with this aim in mind. His teachings—"

"That will do, Student Terrell, thank you. Now: When did the first human settlers reach Canaan, and how did they get here? Student Scott."

With Hezekiel's attention now focused elsewhere, Peter was free to seek out his anonymous benefactor. It should have been easy, for the telepathic voice had tasted of that dry reptilian tang peculiar to a ptero's broadcast, and there were only five of the Nest's pterosaurian natives in the class. However, all were adolescents, ranging from a nearly adult two-year-old down to a yearling. It took finely honed skill to broadcast a message so tightly that only one mind received it, skill none of the pteros present was old enough to possess. It had to be the two-year-old, Peter decided, though the bored-eyed beast did not have the feel of a Telepath. He would have to ask it after class.

"So," Hezekiel was saying, "Great Zorn led his followers across the desert to Canaan. But where—"

Humankind came to the Nest from their own Nest in another part of space, which they called Earth. Peter started; it was the thoughtvoice that had prompted him. The speaker was the yearling, a chunky green-and-gold creature with a blunt, uptilted headcrest. *They called themselves the Chosen. They settled in the pteros' jungle cliffs and prospered there until the Schism, when Great Zorn brought his people over the desert.*

Hezekiel's puffy face flushed crimson. "Student Cathal," he grated, "you will wait until I finish the question, *and* wait until I address you."

As you wish. The ptero yawned. *But my way saves so much time.*

The class tittered. Hezekiel purpled. "Perhaps you'd prefer to teach the class yourself? Save us all a bit of time?"

No, I would not, the yearling answered evenly. *I'm not a Historian. I wouldn't presume myself learned enough to step into the Teacher's place.*

Hezekiel sputtered; there was no way he could find insult in that. "Well . . . see that you keep that in mind from now on. And kindly keep your Telepath talent in check while in class. *You* can absorb what you

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wish by scanning minds, but the rest of the students must learn their lessons the old-fashioned way."

Pounded into our heads by your droning voice, the yearling growled, again on that tightly channeled beam the Teacher couldn't hear. Those seated near Peter stared at him as he tried to stifle his giggles. *Your name's Cathal!* he sent to the ptero. *You're a Telepath! Is this your first year at the Keep!*

The yearling dipped his beak, an affirmative to all three questions. *Where did you learn to tightbeam like that!* Peter asked him. *You don't look old enough to have that kind of control.*

That's what everyone says. Teacher Rasha trained me to—

Rasha! She handles Advanced. She doesn't—

"Student Terrell!"

Peter scrambled to his feet. "Uh, sir?"

The Historian bared his teeth. "Student Terrell, I have had quite enough of your inattention. Summer is gone. Your holiday is over. Here at the Keep, we learn discipline. The rules apply to everyone, including the Terrells. Anything to say to that? No? Very well, then I'll say this—"

Cathal half-rose, his gold eyes intent on the Teacher. *Class dismissed,* he fired at Hezekiel.

"Class dismissed," Hezekiel repeated. With a wild chorus of whoops and yells, the students fled the roof. Hezekiel, his mouth gaping in shock, did nothing to stop them. Peter started after Cathal. "Wait! I wanted to—"

Too late; the yearling was already airborne and soaring away from the Keep. Peter considered sending a thought after him, but didn't. If Cathal was a student, he'd be back tomorrow for classes. Peter could talk to him then.

He galloped downstairs to dinner, his thoughts electric with anticipation. The green-and-gold hatchling intrigued him. He looked forward to seeing him again.

The small nightstand by Peter's bed tipped over as his hip smacked against it. Peter lunged to right it, cursed, and let it lie, choosing instead to fumble himself into his black student's robe. A shock of tousled, sand-yellow hair fell across his eyes; he raked it back with one long-fingered hand, then added a couple of extra swipes in lieu of a proper combing. His stomach, awakened by all the frenetic activity, rumbled a loud inquiry.

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"After class," he promised it, and shut his robe to muffle the answering growl.

Late for his first day of Advanced! How could he oversleep?

Habit, Peter chastised himself. Barnar, Rasha's teaching assistant, never cared if his students came late. Rasha herself was another matter. Peter knew well the Keep's unwritten commandment, handed down from class to class: Thou shall not incur the wrath of the Telepathic Teacher.

Zorn's eyes, where was his belt? Peter groped under the bed. Aha! For a moment he paused to regard the broad strip of woven cloth. Ptero's-eye gold, sign of the Telepath talent. Sign of his family. Since the days of the Schism, four hundred years gone, the Terrells had consistently produced the strongest human Telepaths on the Nest. The first Senior of Teachers, placed in charge of the Keep by Great Zorn himself, had been a Terrell Telepath. A heady legacy, and a difficult one for a boy of fifteen to live up to.

His grandfather held the position now. Simon Terrell personified the image of the family: a strong Telepath with a firm touch and unshakable will, devoted to the welfare of the Keep. For nearly thirty years, Simon had guided the Keep, longer than any of his predecessors, longer than was prudent for a Senior of Teachers without naming and training a successor.

Well, that was hardly the Senior's fault. Normally the job passed from parent to child, the strongest Telepath among the Senior's offspring taking on the post. But Simon had fathered only a single son, whose Telepath talent never grew beyond a feeble ember. The Senior was forced to wait, and hope his son's children proved more talented than their nonpsionic father.

At last luck seemed to be running Simon's way. Two brothers and a sister preceded Peter to the Keep, all competent if not spectacular Telepaths, but strong enough to satisfy the Senior. All of which suited Peter fine. Let one of them get smothered under paperwork and complaints, and spend his or her days wiping hatchlings' noses, which seemed to be a Senior's only function.

For himself, Peter entertained few thoughts of the future. Oh, he had plans — still hazy, but he was confident he'd find a direction eventually. There was a world beyond the Keep, just waiting for him to wander in, one in which he would not be bound to the demands of others. Surely the Keep could spare one unneeded Terrell.

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Peter snickered. He wondered what Rasha would make of this attitude, her with her endless lectures on a Telepath's responsibilities—

Good God, Rasha! Peter knotted the belt about his waist with a frantic twist and dashed for the stairs. If he didn't get to class quick, he wouldn't have a future to worry about.

The other students had already arrived by the time Peter reached the courtyard. He skittered to a stop inside the doorway. Rasha stood just beyond, speaking with the Senior and the Healer Teacher, positioned squarely between Peter and the rest of the class.

"I don't know, Rasha." Simon Terrell's troubled gaze rested on the students. "He's so young. Are you sure—"

His power is considerable, and he has a drive to learn. All he needs is discipline. He can get it best here, with others at his level. She also watched the class; her tail formed slow, contented loops. *He's going to make an excellent Teacher.*

"At his age? Rasha, be serious."

I didn't mean now. *Rhams bite you, Simon, I'm not dead yet! I've still got a few good years left to me—*

"Not if you keep pushing yourself," Ephraim Scott's basso rumble cut in. "Private tutoring, scans at the palisades, handling Advanced *and* Intermediate — Zorn's arse, Rasha, let Barnar take on some of the load. You're not a hatchling, y'know."

The Telepath Teacher sniffed. *Your pardon, Healer. Will I live out the year, at least? That should be enough time to train him.*

Peter crept through the doorway. He could barely glimpse the humans behind Rasha's huge bulk. Ephraim Scott was a brawny, black-bearded man, who looked more as if he should be breaking bones than mending them. His blue Healer's robe barely reached below his knees. The Senior appeared almost fragile beside him, as tall as the muscular Healer, but spare, his lean frame all but lost in the folds of his golden robe. Neither they nor the ptero had noticed Peter yet. The boy held his breath, screened his mind, and began a slow sidle around Rasha's tail. The faint scuff of his sandals was drowned by his grandfather's skeptical words. "A year. It'll take longer than that. First the basics—"

He already knows the basics. At two months he could—

"Two months? Oh Rasha, really! A hatchling's mind doesn't begin to develop until it's three months old."

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History says Great Zorn hatched fully telepathic, and could think within a week. His talent was greater than any ptero's ever hatched. That talent runs strong in our line.

Ephraim snorted. "So he's another Great Zorn, is he? Sure, and my Sekke will be Senior someday. Your mind's going, Rasha."

You doubt an old lizard's judgment, eh? You wouldn't scoff if you'd touched his mind. It's fortunate his mother grew alarmed and called me out to scan him. Talent that powerful must be trained as close to the egg as possible. Wouldn't you agree, Student Terrell?

Peter froze, his mouth dry as sand as Rasha swung her hammer-shaped head around and impaled him with her gaze. *Your mindshield is . . . adequate. That's not good enough for Advanced. Perhaps a few hours' practice tonight will help you perfect it.*

So close—! Peter studied the flagstones. "Yes, Teacher."

I'll expect you after dinner. Don't be late. She turned back to Ephraim and the Senior. Peter trudged toward class. His fellow students offered neither sympathy nor derision; they were too mindful of Rasha's temper. Of the seventeen Telepath trainees, only Peter and two others were human. Pteros had always surpassed humankind in telepathy, the reason a ptero always held the position of Telepath Teacher. Too bad. A human Teacher he could have gotten around.

The class had assembled near the courtyard's central fountain, shut off for the duration of the school year. Two pteros were needling someone Peter couldn't see, a smaller classmate hidden by their bodies. One of the reptiles ducked his beak to nip. Peter heard a snarl, then felt the crackling lash of a psibolt, loosed with tightbeamed aim and to deadly effect. The ptero reeled back with a squawk of pain; its fellow hastily backhopped out of harm's way. One of the humans cried out from the force of the echoes.

Rasha's head snapped toward the class. *Cathal. Behave.*

The author of the psibolt started to protest, then subsided with a surly, *Yes, Teacher.* The other students gingerly inched away from him, granting him plenty of room. Peter hurried forward. That was definitely the yearling from Hezekiel's history class. What was a hatchling, who should have been placed in Intermediate at best, doing in Rasha's Advanced?

The ptero peered down his beak at Peter, regarding him through brilliant golden eyes. *Yes, I'm Cathal. You're the Terrell boy who couldn't keep his mind on his lessons. Right?*

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"Um, yeah. My name's Peter. I wanted to thank you, and . . . are you sure you belong in Advanced?"

That's what that fool asked me. He jabbed his beak curtly toward the ptero who had nipped him, now sagging against one of the stone benches, gulping air. *I'm here because Teacher Rasha told me to come here. That's all I intend to say about it.*

"It's proper procedure," Peter said dryly, "to go through the simpler classes first."

I was in them. Teacher Barnar asked that I be moved to Advanced. There was nothing else he could teach me.

He spoke without a hint of arrogance, simply stating facts. Peter studied him with impressed eyes. The yearling had a feel of power about him, cool and smooth as iron. He had to be stronger than his age indicated; Rasha did not admit hatchlings to her classes on a whim.

A ptero hissed a warning. Rasha had concluded her discussion and was shuffling toward the class. She was a broad-winged, bulky beast, thick-necked with age, her hide rich beach-grass green with a wide golden streak running from her throat and underbelly down to the triangle tip of the tail. Her markings were so similar to Cathal's that Peter was prompted to ask him, "Is she—"

My grandmother's sister. My mother is her niece. She's been my tutor since I was a week old.

"A *week*! That's impossible. A hatchling can't even *think* that early!"

I *could.*

"But—"

Good morning, Rasha said, *and welcome to Advanced Telepath Training. I trust you've been using this time to limber up!*

The class sheepishly started in on the mental warm-up exercises all had learned in Beginner. Peter risked a glance at the Keep. Ephraim had already stalked back into the Healer's wing, but the Senior lingered, observing. He smiled at Peter, nodded, and withdrew.

Rasha extended her wings and neck, easing age-kinks out of her muscles. Her mind gave off a powerful hum, like the song of a giant bird. *If you're ready now, we'll begin. Who knows what a matchbeam is! Student Fisher.*

The mousy boy crouched behind a big blue ptero gulped. "A matchbeam is, uh, sort of a contest between two Telepaths, like, uh, a tug-of-war,

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sorta." He looked ready to melt between the flagstones. "Isn't it?"

Rasha sighed. *Crude, but near enough. Who knows the purpose of—*

Matchbeaming determines an individual's strength by testing how well he can match his talent against a predetermined force. Those were Rasha's own words; Cathal repeated them letter-perfect, right down to the inflections in her thoughtvoice. *It determines a Telepath's talent level, how much power he needs to exert to maintain his shields—*

To prevent another from overwhelming him, or controlling him . . . or simply from scanning her thoughts to find out who's going to be asked the next question. Rasha's deceptively dry tone was a clear reprimand. *It's a pity the same exercise can't be used to strengthen patience. You've been warned before, haven't you, Cathal!*

Cathal's tail shushed over the stones. *By you and others, Teacher.*

Good. Perhaps with enough repetitions you'll remember it someday. Back to matchbeaming. Now that we know the theory, who's ready for practice!

Cathal hopped to the forefront, eager to begin. Rasha pointedly ignored him and began to divide the class, pairing those of near-equal skill and development. As always, Peter was matched with a human, this time Raphael Fisher. His twin sister, Magdalene, perched on the rim of the fountain to wait.

It isn't fair. The speaker was a narrow-winged gray, the same ptero who'd been teasing Cathal before class. His thoughts still smarted from the encounter. He'd been matched with the yearling, a prospect obviously unappealing to both. *Here we blast away at each other while Magdalene just sits there. Why can't I match with her!*

We can't matchbeam with humans because they're weaker than we are. They're born at hatchling level and stay there. Even the Terrells can't match a ptero's power. I don't know where they find the guts to call themselves Telepaths.

Peter stiffened. He remembered the feel of that thoughtvoice from Beginner. It scraped across the surface of his mind like a woodcarver's sander, grating against the grain. But the Senior took him out of class. . . .

Student Lios. The others suspended their exercise at the tone in Rasha's voice. *You have an opinion you'd like to share with us!*

A low hiss sounded from behind a pair of pteros. They shuffled out of the way. Abandoned to her merciless glare, Lios hissed again. He was a

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slim-bodied two-year-old, dark loam brown with the same golden throat and underbelly as Rasha and Cathal. His crest was lean and sharp. *I was only pointing out,* he said in a sullen thoughtgrowl, *that humans can't hope to matchbeam with even a weak ptero Telepath. I don't know why you don't stick them in a class of their own. Better than limiting* us.

Rasha's tail thumped against the stones. *You've been "pointing this out" for quite a while, as I recall. The Teachers discussed your "suggestion" and found it without merit. Unless you've devised a better system for training human Telepaths!*

Why even bother! A human Telepath's good for nothing other than holding us back. He snapped his beak in Peter's direction. *What's the point of training us to find our furthest limits, when we'll never be allowed to use our talents to the fullest because we might hurt them!*

Rasha let out a long, slow hiss, indication of her temper at its deadliest. *Refresh my memory, Lios. What is the purpose of the Keep!*

To train talents. The first-year hatchlings know that. What I meant—

"Training" entails more than discovering the limits of one's talents. It involves control . . . and responsibility. Two aspects you've forgotten. We're not here to prove who's stronger than whom. We're here to try to achieve our full potential . . . and to help those less talented achieve theirs. Or perhaps you feel the "weak" aren't worth the effort!

Any other ptero would have withered before the rage in Rasha's eyes. Lios countered with his own molten glare. His wings flexed as his neck curved down, beak low and straight. Cold clenched Peter's soul, and a ptero behind him whimpered. Challenge? Did Lios truly intend to challenge the Telepath Teacher?

Rasha growled, fierce and loud. The air between them sizzled with a mental slap, meant for Lios only. He shrilled and staggered back. His head sank between his shoulders, though his tail continued to thrash behind him. Submission. Not surrender.

Cathal's wing nudged Peter backward. *Move away. He's going to—*

Lios exploded into the air, his wings barely missing the students nearest to him. He shot straight away from the Keep, west toward the mountains. The electric tension in the air eased a little. Cathal thumped his tail and rumbled.

Rasha settled back with a weary sigh. *The first day of class. . . . I suppose this would have come up eventually. Does anyone else share Lio's*

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opinions! She surveyed the class, their averted eyes and twisting tails, and grunted. *What about you, Magdalene! Raphael, Peter! Do you feel you're being coddled!*

"Coddling" was not how Peter would have described his training. His aching head denied it. So did Raphael and Magdalene. Rasha grunted again. She cocked her head toward the west; for a moment, Peter thought she would abandon the class and fly off in pursuit of Lios. She folded her wings instead. *Then we'll continue. I believe we were matchbeaming . . . !*

The class paired again under Rasha's supervision. This time, Peter sat on the fountain's rim while Magdalene matched with her brother. He pondered Lios's argument. Just because pteros were stronger Telepaths than humans was no reason they couldn't practice together. A strong human Telepath should be able to match the level of a weak ptero Telepath. They'd never know if they weren't allowed to try.

A light touch, cool as iron, whispered in his mind. *Would you like to!*

Peter looked around and up, into Cathal's gleaming eyes. Lios's abrupt departure and the redivision of the students had left the yearling without a matchbeam partner. Peter risked a glance at Rasha, who had her back to them, monitoring another pair. "What about the Teacher? She'll —"

She won't hear us. C'mon. I've been wanting to match with a Terrell; I've heard so many stories. You ever match with a ptero!

"Once with Barnar, in Beginner. The Senior was there." A brief test, to determine Peter's entry-level strength. He'd been wanting to test himself against a ptero again. Cathal was barely a year old, nowhere near an adult's strength. Surely he could matchbeam with a hatchling!

Lios had been a hatchling, too. . . . It was only a game, he said, a demonstration of skill. . . . Before it was done, Reuvin Wright lay screaming on the stones, his mind in flames, his talent all but burned away. . . . We were only playing, Lios told the Senior. His eyes were fierce, without remorse. How was I to know he was so weak? . . .

A sharp pinch at the foot of his thoughts jerked Peter back to here and now. *Well! Do you want to try it or not!*

Rasha still had not heard them. Peter grinned. "All right."

Their minds slid together. Peter touched a wall of iron, smooth and hard: Cathal's mindshield. Peter pressed against it, gradually increasing the volume of his voice from a whisper to a shout. Cathal let him set the pace, though he chafed at its slowness. Once the ptero's broadcast took a

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sudden jump, forcing Peter to leap to catch up. He managed to maintain the match, just barely. *We're not running a race,* he beamed at Cathal. *Rasha's right. You're too impatient.*

And you're too cautious. Stop flopping around like a beached fish and show me what you can do!

He'd show the ptero what he could, all right. This overconfident hatchling deserved a lesson. Peter slowed his broadcast further, shunting aside Cathal's fuming protests. Behind the dragging increase in power, he hoarded a measure of strength. Pteros might be stronger than humans, but they were unimaginative, less able to deal with the unexpected. A quick burst would throw Cathal off-balance, enabling Peter to lance through his shields. The trick had almost worked with Teacher Barnar, or would have had the Senior not been monitoring. Humans not matchbeam with pteros? He would disprove *that!*

They reached what he wanted Cathal to take for his limit. He could feel the hatchling's impatience, a hot undercurrent to his broadcast. He let Cathal rage for another second, then struck. Every erg of his power flew in a potent psychic spear, hurled at Cathal's shield. He sped a scan after it, for a peek at the hatchling's mind once his strike cracked Cathal's defense.

He hit a wall of iron. Impossibly, Cathal had heard him, and sloughed off the shock of the strike. The ptero steadied his own shielding, then increased his broadcast to a roar that swamped Peter's mind like an ocean wave. It felt as if a huge iron cage had surrounded his mind. The bars closed around his being . . . then paused, to measure and appraise, before they eased away.

Without warning, a second mind burst in upon them, with a sound like the outraged scream of a giant bird. The unexpected influx almost burst through Peter's shields. At once the cage of iron tightened — not attack, but defense against the outsider. The great bird shrilled and beat its wings before it slid away. The iron cage vanished as well, leaving Peter alone inside his mind.

The outside world returned to his senses in whirling, brilliant spurts. He became aware of the solid press of the flagstones against his knees, the salty sting of sweat in his eyes, the hot tang of blood from a bitten lip in his mouth. He had toppled off the rim of the fountain. Rasha's tail supported him, a thick cable of muscle coiled around his torso. Her voice was thunderous in its fury — not, thank Zorn, directed at him. *Cathal! What did you think you were doing!*

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Matchbeaming. The hatchling wasn't even winded. *I wanted to learn his strength; he wanted to learn mine. Don't growl at me! He isn't hurt. I broke the link before he exceeded his limit.* He sounded impressed. *He's stronger than you told me a human would be. Even tried a sneak attack. He didn't think I'd notice.*

Human-ptero matchbeaming is strictly forbidden. You know that.

Why! We just proved it can be done. It's not like we're a couple of careless hatchlings. This is Advanced.

By this time the Keep's spinning had slowed enough for Peter to catch hold of his voice. "Please," he gasped at Rasha, "I'm all right. I asked for this. It wasn't Cathal's fault."

You're all right! She sounded surprised. Her scan licked briefly over his mind before she turned to Cathal. Peter could not read the look in her eyes. She seemed puzzled, as if she confronted some strange new creature that only resembled a ptero. You *broke the match!*

It was that or burn him out, and my control's better than that. You should know; you trained me. You didn't think I'd let Lios's idiot assertions go unchallenged, did you!

Rasha growled. She lunged forward abruptly and delivered a sharp nip to Cathal's shoulder, an adult's reprimand to a disobedient hatchling. The yearling squawked. *Wait on the roof until class is over. Student Terrell, you're excused from this session. Go see the Healer; make sure there's no damage. The rest of you* — Her fierce glare raked the class like talons. *If you feel the urge to experiment, talk to me first. I want no more accidents.*

Like Reuvin? Peter thought. Did she fear Cathal would hurt a human student? She should have stopped them, then. Hadn't she heard them? Cathal was strong, but he couldn't be powerful enough to handle a matchbeam while shielding them both from the Telepath Teacher's awareness. He was just too young.

Great Zorn hatched fully telepathic. . . . His talent runs strong in our line. . . .

He sped a quick question up to the roof, where Cathal sat in a sullen crouch, exiled from class. *Cathal! How strong are you!*

Strong enough to merit Advanced.

Rasha heard them and barked a warning. Cathal shot a hiss at her before tipping his head toward Peter. The outer lided of one eye slid together briefly, imitation of a human wink.

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Peter grinned and winked back, before he ducked around Rasha's tail and hurried into the Keep.

PETER MANAGED to catch a nap after lunch, and ate a light dinner, mostly fruit and grain. Rasha had sent word their evening session was still on, and he didn't want to go into that drowsy or overstuffed. The Telepath Teacher had little mercy for the inattentive.

The twilight air carried a hint of autumn's approaching cool, flavored by the salt of the distant sea. The courtyard was empty. Peter settled onto a bench to wait. It wasn't like Rasha to be late. Perhaps she'd forgotten, although that was unlikely. Maybe she wanted him to fidget awhile, punishment for his actions in class today. Peter grumbled; she succeeded neatly. A brisk, clear night like this. . . . He could be on the beach with Sarah right now, romping through the wavelets with her laughter in his ears. Or perhaps a romp of a different kind, up behind the dunes. . . .

Rasha's not here. Cathal's casual voice upset Peter's thoughts. A low ripple of pteroan laughter drew the boy's attention to the roof. Cathal squatted on the rim, right wing extended as he made a show of inspecting the taut folds of ribbed leather. He'd shattered an exquisite fantasy and knew it. *She and the Senior are out at the palisades. They'll be along in a while.*

"What are you doing here?"

Same as you. Practice in control. Rasha's punishment. He switched his inspection to his left wing. *She wouldn't come right out and say it, but I know why she won't let us matchbeam. It's the instincts.*

"Instincts?"

Pteroan instinct. The need to establish dominance, maintain the pecking order. It's bred into us. Haven't you ever watched a nest of hatchlings working out their status?

"They don't kill each other."

Because mama doesn't let them. One learns restraint, or else only one hatchling per clutch would survive to adulthood. But the instincts remain. Watch a bunch of us feeding sometime, and you'll see what I mean. Training can overcome it, up to a point, but even Rasha won't matchbeam with a human. She doesn't like accidents.

Rasha? The Telepath Teacher, afraid to matchbeam? He tried to picture

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the responsible Rasha turning on a human student. It sounded so absurd, and yet. . . . "Hasn't anyone ever tried?"

Oh, they tried. Hezekiel Davidson says they took a swipe at it back in Great Zorn's day. Zorn had to put a stop to it quick. The pteros kept savaging their human matches; they couldn't help themselves. The instincts were too strong.

"No one ever told me that."

Students aren't supposed to know. I wouldn't know, except Hezekiel didn't think I could hear him from so far away. Cathal snickered. *I hear a lot more than the adults think. Being this talented so young has its advantages.*

"If this is true, why haven't you pteros wiped us out?"

Cathal flipped the last third of his tail, a shrug. *Who knows! Maybe it's just Telepaths. You know what everybody says — how the Telepaths aren't like normal pteros or humans. Our minds are different, more, uh —*

"Twisted." That was Ephraim Scott's opinion. They shared a chuckle over it. *It was always the Telepaths who attacked,* Cathal went on. *Never any other talent, or a talentless ptero. I think it was human talents that set them off. To us, a talentless human is mentally helpless, a hatchling to be looked after. A human Telepath is a contradiction, a challenge to a ptero Telepath's place in the pecking order. A threat.*

"Then you should have attacked me this morning. Instead you broke the link. You even screened me from Rasha when she caught us. What makes you so careful?"

What, injure the Senior's grandson in front of the class! I'm not crazy. Anyway, I like you. I wish I could try matchbeaming again, with a fully trained human Telepath — the Senior, maybe. Pity I know they won't let me.

"I don't know why not. I'll vouch for your control. Besides, didn't Great Zorn use to matchbeam with humans? The first Terrells were trained that way. And you're his descendant. If he could do it —"

Cathal folded his wings with a hiss. *You and Rasha. I'm sick of hearing this! "Great Zorn did this and that," as if I'm supposed to live up to it. You don't really believe all that drivel, do you! The Historians must have made it up. I don't care what Hezekiel says.*

"History tells us —"

The hatchling clacked his beak shut. That *for history. Pteros are*

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animals. Our actions and reactions are predetermined by instinct. We do not *abandon territory and nest with a group of humans in tow, or cross unexplored deserts with no more to go on than some dreamer's vision of a sea beyond the sand. And this!* He snapped his wings to indicate the Keep. *A school to train psi talents! Other people's hatchlings! That's a human idea. A ptero would never consider it. We look out for ourselves, and our hatchlings and bondsmates. That's where it ends. You attribute all this to Zorn because it makes a better story.*

"The story could be true."

Hah! Show me a ptero who isn't ultimately governed by his instincts, and I'll believe you. More likely you'd be showing me a crazy ptero. Rasha thinks Great Zorn was *crazy; his behavior certainly supports it, if the stories are true like you said. That must be why he put your line and not his own in charge of the Keep.* He stretched his neck seaward, scanning the sky. *Damn it, where's Rasha! It's getting dark.*

Peter stood. "Maybe she forgot," he said without hope.

We both know better. I'm going to look for her. Wait here.

The yearling launched himself from the roof and flapped south, toward the seaside cliffs where the pteros nested. Peter watched him until he was only a speck in the purpling sky, then sank back onto the bench. He was reluctant to stay, but far more reluctant to leave lest Rasha return and find him gone. A half hour more, he decided. If neither she nor Cathal was back by then, he couldn't be faulted for leaving.

The last of the sunlight faded. The Nest's small red moon rose above the horizon. Shadows stretched across the courtyard. Peter checked the sky again, and this time noticed a ptero-shape high up, its wings slashing the air with vicious strokes. He was on his feet and adjusting his robe before he realized it couldn't be Rasha; the beast was too lean and long-tailed. Not Cathal, either. Barnar? Sekke? What other ptero would have business at the Keep this late?

The ptero swept down onto the roof. Peter recognized him now, too late to duck into the Keep. *Who's down there?* Lios demanded. *Oh. Terrell. Of course. I should have known they'd leave a spy here.*

"I'm waiting for Teacher Rasha." Peter hoped his mindshield was as steady as his voice. "She and the Senior should be here any minute. They're —"

Looking for me. I know. His wings snapped and rustled, now shut, now

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half-open. His tail slapped the rim of the roof, nervous, angry.

Peter didn't move. The ptero's agitation disturbed him. Pteros were usually such easygoing, predictable beasts. He slipped a narrow thought-beam toward the coast. If he could find Cathal or Rasha. . . .

The beam crashed against a psychic wall. *Don't,* Lios warned with a vocal hiss. *I don't want Rasha finding me. I know what she wants to do. Jealous old lizard! Weak in the head, like a human. I said* don't!

Peter had sent a broadcast questing into the building. Surely there must be someone else at the Keep tonight — His mental query was wrenched from the Keep and flung back at him. He staggered and grabbed at the bench to steady himself, his head spinning.

Lios growled, a sound more contemptuous than angry. *So poor. A hatchling shields itself better. And Rasha let you into Advanced!* His eyes took on a feral glint. *Let's see what you're made of, Terrell.*

He began to pick at Peter's shield with vicious little jabs. When Peter deflected them, Lios increased both volume and speed, harsh psychic bites that grew louder with each thrust. Peter's head began to throb. He could hear the pulse of Lios's power, grating and strong with only a minimum of control, either unaware or uncaring of the damage his talent could do.

Lios chittered. *Too strong, Terrell! I thought you were a Telepath.* He snapped off a psibolt that sent Peter reeling against the fountain, his shields flaring with the effort of holding it off. Peter forced his mind to stillness, forced back the scream of pain that roiled within his throat, tried to hide from the ptero's awareness any sign of weakness. Lios was not toying with him anymore. The reptile's tail began to twitch in a predatory lash. *So feeble. A higher volume, a little pressure, and I could overload your nerves and leave your brain a pile of ashes.* His wings extended as his body sank into a hunting crouch. *I can kill you.*

Then another mind touched Peter's, a burst of iron, quick and gone. On its heels followed a shout from the Healer's wing. Ephraim Scott burst into the courtyard. "Sekke? That you?" He stared up at the roof and found Lios. "You're not Sekke. Zorn blast it, where is he? I could've sworn I heard him."

Lios growled down at him and flexed his foot-claws. Peter clutched the fountain's rim and gulped air into his lungs. Ephraim's unexpected arrival had broken the ptero's concentration. Lios had not risen from his hunting stance. Peter tried to cry out a warning with a voice and mind that

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would not obey him. Lios wouldn't, *couldn't* attack a Teacher. . . .

"Well?" Ephraim folded his arms across his chest. "*Somebody* out here called for a Healer. C'mon, I haven't got all night. I've got schedules to finish. Goddamned paperwork —"

But Lios no longer heard the Healer. He had gone rigid, all but his thrashing tail, listening. Free of the ptero's power, Peter reached into the dark and found Rasha, the Senior on her back, racing in from the beach. Iron touched his mind again, solid, supportive. Cathal, though hidden, was near.

Lios's snarl was horrible to hear. He vaulted from the roof and sped toward the mountains. Ephraim hurled a curse after him. "Blasted jokers! At that age they think anything's funny. Just wait'll you need a Healer, you spindly-necked son of a rham! And you, Pete, what are you doing out here — Zorn's arse!"

Peter's legs refused to hold him any longer. He toppled and would have hit the stones had not the Healer caught him. His thoughts ached, worse than after his matchbeam with Cathal. He felt an electric tingle as Ephraim scanned him, then used his Healer's talent to steady Peter's faltering heartbeat. Light-headed, he slumped in Ephraim's grip. A cool brush of iron swept over his mind, dousing Lios's red fire.

"Zorn curse me for a brainless ornitt," Ephraim muttered. "Should've known it was you called me, but it sounded so much like a ptero — What happened? That foolbrained lizard push you around? Zorn-blasted hatchlings don't know their own strength. . . .

A blast of wind and a mental question both swept across the courtyard as Rasha backwinged down to land. The touch of iron vanished. *Ephraim! What's going on?*

"You tell me. I was working on my schedules, when somebody called me out here. Said he needed a Healer. I thought it was Sekke. Anyway, I found Pete here, and — oh hell, what's his name? Brown and gold. One of yours. Sharp eyes."

Lios, Rasha hissed. She looked as if she wished to say more, but kept silent as the Senior leaped from her back and ran to Peter. He eased Peter out of the Healer's grip and into his own. "Peter? He didn't hurt you? You're all right?"

"I'm fine," Peter chattered. "He was just . . . playing." As he had with Reuvin Wright. Peter tried to quash that thought as he noticed Rasha's

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unwinking stare fixed on him. Her scan prodded the surface of his most recent memories, rooting for truth. What she saw obviously displeased her. She scraped her foot-claws on the stone, her tailtip snapping. *Simon. What we discussed—*

"Yes, yes. Ephraim, did you check him? Is he—"

"In better shape than you. Pretty agitated, and I don't like the way his heart was jumping around, but a quiet night in bed'll fix that. And no buts from you," he said to Peter. "Or you," he shot at Rasha. "Whatever you had planned for tonight, forget it. It's bed for you, hatchling. How many times do I have to warn you people about overexertion? Strain your brains and it strains your bodies, and then more work for me. Damned Telepaths. Crazy as cats in heat. Present company included."

Ephraim contined to gripe all the way to Peter's room, all the while he was bundling Peter into bed, and while he poured a cup of lukewarm wine and held it for Peter to sip. Attuned to the unspoken, Peter was all too aware of the unease Ephraim tried to mask beneath his surly manner, and the glances he exchanged with the Senior. Simon hovered behind the Healer, silent and grim-eyed, his own thoughts walled away. He spoke only once, to wish Peter good night, before Ephraim seized his wrist and hauled him out of the room, with a final command to Peter to get some sleep and fly wide of those goddamned brainless hatchlings in the future.

Peter waited until the echoes of their footfalls had died before he sent a scan questing outside the Keep. *Cathal? I know you're there. You called Ephraim. Where are you?*

Iron curled around his mind, a strong yet flexible touch. *On the roof. Nobody's spotted me yet. You're not hurt?*

No, just a bit shook-up. I understand now, about the instincts. I thought he was going to—

Why did you lie to the Senior? Lios wasn't joking. He'd have attacked you, and me, too, if I'd tried to stop him directly. Weakness — or what we perceive as weakness — always provokes a ptero. Lucky that trick with Ephraim worked. Lios didn't count on interruption. Cathal's mindtouch thinned momentarily before surging back to Peter. *Rasha's been worried about him for a long time. She's going to talk to the Senior. Want to listen in?*

What? *We're not allowed to—*

Ignoring his protest, Cathal mentally gathered him in and swept them

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both down to the Healer's wing. Peter experienced a sensation of floating several feet above the floor, seated atop an iron bar. Their link was tenuous, allowing Peter the option of withdrawing, should he choose. He weighed his curiosity against the consequences, and stayed where he was. Cathal whuffed approval.

Rasha paced the length of the wing and back, the sound of her mind a restless hum, her tail slashing air in her wake. The Healer's wing had been shaped from an enormous cavern, sunk into the depth of the mountain. Here the Healers were trained, their talent of cellular regeneration directed to heal the sick and injured. Only this section of the Keep's interior was large enough to accommodate a ptero. Even so, Rasha's head came near to brushing the ceiling. Peter wondered what she had to discuss with the Senior that required the wing's privacy, rather than the more comfortable, open-air accessibility of roof or courtyard.

The Telepath Teacher sent her thoughts down the hall to meet the Senior. *How is he, Simon?*

"Ephraim says he's fine, a little frightened." The Senior entered the wing through its inner connecting door to the Keep proper. "He's all right, Rasha. Nothing happened."

This time. But you can't say now I wasn't justified.

"A disagreement with his Teacher isn't proof." As he spoke, the Senior automatically scanned to ensure they were not overheard. Peter's thought-self held its breath, but the scan passed them by. Cathal sniggered. "Or maybe you just don't care for a student who questions you, eh?"

This wasn't any disagreement. Lios challenged me — not the Telepath Teacher or her teachings, but me personally. Had I shown weakness, he would have attacked. Just as he attacked your grandson tonight.

"Nonsense. That wasn't an attack. All hatchlings like to flex their wings a bit. Didn't you have to reprimand Cathal this morning for just that sort of thing?"

Cathal isn't Lios. Cathal has been taught control almost from the moment he hatched. Lios didn't have that advantage. I've warned you about this before, Simon, mingling ptero students with humans before they've been taught restraint.

"Barnar and I tested him before admitting him to Advanced, and he seemed perfectly—"

"Seemed," yes. Lios has always "seemed" normal . . . until he gets into

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a situation that pits his talent against another Telepath's. I stole a glimpse of Peter's memories of that . . . incident in the courtyard. If Ephraim hadn't interfered, I believe Lios would have killed him.

The Senior had unfastened his belt and begun to remove his robe. He froze at Rasha's accusation. "That's impossible. Pteros don't attack humans without provocation. Granted, Lios is a bit —"

Unstable!

"Aggressive. Also opinionated. Other than one disagreement" — his tone warned Rasha against interruption — "he's done nothing. Certainly nothing heinous enough to warrant your choice of action."

Oh! Shall we wait, then, until he cripples another Telepath, as he did Reuvin Wright! Or kills someone!

Rasha's tail made dry shushes as it swept back and forth across the floor. The Senior watched its pattern for a moment before shrugging out of his robe. "The incident with the Wright boy occurred when Lios was still a hatchling. He didn't know any better. He must have learned by now."

He has not. He will not. And he's nearly an adult. She raked the floor with her foot-claws, as if she could read the past and start afresh. *I should have worked with him myself, as I have with Cathal. Maybe I could have rechanneled these . . . tendencies. But now . . . he's too strong, Simon, and he shows no inclination toward controlling himself. His talent is going to overwhelm him, unless it's contained here and now.*

Cathal hissed; he had already guessed what Peter was just coming to realize: the import behind Rasha's words. The Senior flung his robe onto a cot and adjusted his pale gold tunic. "You're asking me to take a serious step, Rasha. One I can't justify without stronger proof. I can't condemn Lios in the absence of a crime."

And I won't wait until he commits one. If he won't control himself, then we must control him — now, *before he grows too powerful to stop. If burning a portion of his talent out of his brain is the only way to do that, then so be it.*

Peter gasped; Cathal shushed him in a voice that trembled as Peter's did. Even the Senior blanched at the suggestion. "Rasha, you're overreacting. Lios was testing you, as any good psi student will test his Teacher. He's young and proud of his talent."

And unstable. Another "benefit" of Zorn's blood. I was hoping I wouldn't have to remind you of the purpose of the Keep.

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"I know it as well as you do, Telepath Teacher. To train—"

More than train. To discipline and control. And if talents are abused, and control should fail. . . .

"Then the level of talent must be limited, or else destroyed entirely. By Zorn's own order." The words came out reluctantly. "I know that, Rasha. I understand as well as you a talent's need for control. Especially the Telepath's. I've lived with it since my talent matured, just as you have."

No, Simon. You understand only your own kind, not mine. Great Zorn had good reason to give that order. He knew what happens when an animal possesses the power to kill with its mind.

"Great Zorn—"

Was insane. His power drove him mad. No ptero could exist at the level of talent we know he attained. Not and stay rational. She sighed; the sound was almost a whimper. *I envy you, Simon. Your human mind. Whatever the difference is in your brains that allows you humans to override your basic instincts. We pteros don't have that option. It's worse for those of us of Zorn's descent, for a Telepath can destroy the innocent with itself.* Unblinking eyes of reptile gold met eyes of human blue. *I lost a sister and brother and a daughter to madness. Sometimes early training can save them. Sometimes it can't. I tried to help Lios and couldn't. All we can do now is cut his talent back to a level he can deal with, before he becomes a threat to the other students.*

The Senior turned to the cot and carefully folded his robe, careful also not to look at Rasha. "I want to talk to him first. If I feel further steps are warranted, I'll call Assembly. You're not to take any action before then. *Any* action. Do you understand?"

Agreed. But only if I go with you when you see him.

"You're that worried, eh? Very well. You're aware of the consequences, however, should you be proved wrong."

Rasha sniffed, untroubled. *I don't mind losing my position. Cathal is progressing beyond even my expectations. I suppose now is as good a time as any to name him my successor.*

"So soon? You're moving him awfully fast for a student his age. He's what, a year old? Can he handle it? Or will we have to hold this conversation again when *he* reaches adulthood?"

The circumstances are not the same. Cathal is . . . unique.

The Senior chuckled and draped his robe over his arm. "Won't hear

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anything said against your favorite, eh? I always had you pegged for a sentimentalist."

You're a fine one to speak of favorites, Simon. You wouldn't be so slow to examine Lios if Peter had been hurt.

"Hmph. Of course I'm concerned about Peter. He's my grandson, my only son's youngest. Not to mention the strongest human Telepath I've seen in thirty years. I've waited a long time for the proper successor, and I wouldn't want to—"

Peter heard nothing beyond those last words. Shock rendered him deaf. Shock, and an unexpected surge of anger. *Successor! He never discussed it with me. And he talks as if it's already decided. Because I'm a Terrell, he just assumed. . . .*

His emotions must have come through louder than he intended, for Rasha jerked her head around with a harsh, demanding bark. Instantly, Cathal snapped them out of the Healer's wing. Peter found himself back in his room, lying in bed. His left arm had fallen asleep. *That's done it,* Cathal growled in the back of his head. *If you can't control your volume better than that—*

Peter! CATHAL!

Oops. Gotta run. Cathal's mind brushed briefly across Peter's before the link winked out. Peter heard the slap of desperate wings rushing past his window. Hot upon that, blasted Rasha's fiery roar. *How dare you! Impudent—*

Rasha, the Senior's voice intruded, a cooler touch that tried to quench her rage. His presence inserted itself between Peter and the furious Telepath Teacher. *Not now. He's had enough shocks tonight.*

Rasha's hiss was audible all the way from the Healer's wing. *We'll discuss this in the morning, hatchling,* she snarled. Peter's awareness of her ebbed as she withdrew. The Senior's touch lingered just long enough to let Peter feel his grandfather's displeasure, before that also eased away.

Peter buried himself beneath his blanket and tried to massage feeling back into his left arm. No chance he'd get much sleep tonight, not with Rasha's punishment waiting for him in the morning. He also didn't envy Cathal his fate when Rasha caught up with him.

Cathal. . . . Peter's thoughts returned to the yearling's farewell mind-touch. From time to time, a human and ptero formed an unbreakable mindlink, a bond, like Ephraim's rapport with Sekke. Neither side fully

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understood how or why it happened, only that it did, and could not be forced or broken. Only death could separate the human-ptero pair.

He was not bonded to Cathal. The hatchling would have known for certain, even if Peter hadn't. For a ptero to offer such an intimate touch to a human not his bondsmate was most unusual. But then, much about Cathal was unusual.

His thoughts felt as prickly as his arm. Too much, too quickly, had been thrown at him tonight, Lios's challenge and Cathal's aberrations not the least of it. Great Zorn, condoning the destruction of talent? The founder of the Keep, insane? How much of this was kept from hatchlings deemed unready for certain concepts? Like the reason behind the ban on human-ptero matchbeaming. Like the Senior's intention to mold Peter into his successor.

I don't want to be Senior. He just assumed I'd follow him, because I'm a Terrell Telepath, and Terrells are always Senior. I have to find a way to tell him. Somehow.

The expected punishment from Rasha did not materialize. When Peter arrived at class the next morning, he learned the Telepath Teacher was busy elsewhere. She was guiding a number of her better students, Cathal among them, in telepathic sweeps of the palisades, seacoast, and forests of Canaan. An experiment, the Senior called it in an address to the class, an exercise to extend her student's range and sharpen their scanning abilities. Peter, fresh from breakfast gossip, knew otherwise. Lios had vanished. No one had seen him since he threatened Peter in the courtyard.

Threatened. The other Teachers might question the accuracy of that assessment. Rasha wouldn't. Peter didn't. He woundered if his grandfather would indeed call Assembly, if Peter would be asked to testify. If his words would be the testimony that convicted Lios, and convinced the Teachers to burn the ptero's Telepath talent out of his brain.

Her classes Rasha left in Barnar's care, all but Advanced, which the Senior conducted himself. By the third day, however, he had slipped into the role of supervisor, leaving the remaining students to their own practicing. His eyes were distant, only his body with them in the courtyard. Scanning for Rasha, Peter guessed, both wishing for and dreading her success. Every moment Rasha remained away was another moment Lios remained missing, another moment Simon Terrell could delay the un-

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Among the talents at the Keep, bad news traveled literally at the speed of thought.

thinkable. Peter's classmates sensed it as well, and were sober and subdued. Among the talents at the Keep, bad news traveled literally at the speed of thought.

"That will do for today." The Senior waved his arm in dismissal, even though the period was only half-over. The pteros, never slow to refuse good fortune, hastily made their escape. Magdalene took a step toward the Senior, her concern evident in thought and expression, but the Senior sent her and Raphael off with a quiet smile. Peter, however, he beckoned to his side. "Would you come with me to my office, Peter? I need your help with a few things."

The Senior's office was spare and neat, only the litter of schedule scrolls on the desk indicative of the reshuffling brought about by Rasha's absence. A thin, worn rug on the floor, a faded wall hanging behind the desk, and a large painting opposite the door were the only concessions the Senior made toward livability. The painting depicted the desert at night, endless, barren rolls of pallid sand. A ragged crowd of humans staggered through the dunes, too many for all to ride the panting handful of pteros that dotted the sky. Another ptero, riderless, soared at their head, black as the night that engulfed them, his gold eyes hard with determination: Great Zorn.

Peter turned away from the painting. "How's Rasha doing?" he asked.

"Hmm?" The Senior glanced up from the chaos on his desk. "What about Rasha?"

"Her, um, exercise. I wondered if—"

"She hasn't found him yet." The Senior must have decided there was little point in lying to another Telepath. "There's been no sign of him. I've no idea when she'll be able to resume her teaching duties. I was hoping...." He shuffled the scrolls in his hands. "I was hoping you'd consent to help out with the Beginner classes. Barnar's spreading himself too thin. To be honest, so am I. We'd both appreciate it."

"What about Cathal? Rasha's named him to take over—"

Peter bit off the end of the sentence when Senior's frown reminded him he wasn't supposed to know that. "Rasha wants Cathal on the search with

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her. She feels he's of more use where he is. Just as I feel you could serve the Keep better as an instructor than as a student, at least for the time being. You don't mind, do you, Peter?"

He didn't specifically make it an order. Neither did he ask. Peter found his gaze straying to the scrolls in the Senior's hand. A sour suspicion stirred inside his mind.

"There are six human students in Beginner," the Senior went on. He returned the scrolls to the desktop. "You'd be helping Barnar immensely if you tutored them."

The news almost deflected the course of Peter's thoughts. "You're separating the class, sir? Splitting the human and ptero students?"

The Senior nodded. "We deemed it best, under the circumstances. I don't suppose Lios's disappearance — and the reason for it — is any secret to the Telepaths."

"Uh, no, sir." As Peter spoke, he inched nearer the desk. "What about the other classes? Intermediate and Advanced?"

"I'll be taking those myself. Barnar will continue to instruct the pteros, although. . . ." The Senior turned to the window, gazing at the sky as if his wishes could bring Rasha into view. "Barnar has never been entirely comfortable around older Telepaths. I may have to ask Rasha to send Cathal back, after all. He's young, but the others respect him. . . ."

The moment the Senior turned his back, Peter's hands pounced on the scrolls. He unrolled tomorrow morning's schedule and found what he'd expected. His fingers crushed the scroll into a crinkled tube.

The Senior glanced over at the sound. "Peter, what are you —"

"My name is on here." His words trembled under the unaccustomed weight of anger. "For tomorrow. It's already on here."

"Well, of course. You're taking Beginner. Why? Would you rather have Intermediate?"

"You didn't even wait until you'd asked me. You just assumed I'd say yes."

The Senior's mouth tightened at the corners. "Peter, this is a difficult time for the Keep. We need everyone's cooperation. The Terrells especially must set an example, for Teachers and students alike. I didn't think I'd have to explain this to you."

"That doesn't give you the right to make this kind of decision without asking me first."

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"This had nothing to do with rights. It's a matter of duty. For a Terrell the welfare of the Keep must always come first, before personal wishes or even family. Always."

"That isn't fair—"

"No one decreed it must be. That's the way it's been since Great Zorn chose us to guide the Keep after his death. When you're Senior, you'll understand the need for—"

"I don't want to be Senior."

He hadn't meant to blurt it out so baldly, regretting it all the more when he saw how it darkened his grandfather's eyes. "I mean . . . I always assumed Jedediah—"

"Your brother has neither the talent nor temperament to be Senior. Peter, I didn't ask you because I thought you understood. I was the strongest Telepath among my family; I knew my duty from childhood, and was proud to accept the position. As I thought you would be."

The Senior's tone was quiet, reasonable, but with a subtle undertone that expected obedience. Peter shut his mind against the force of his grandfather's will. This time, he vowed, he would not be intimidated. "I'm sorry, sir. I can't."

The Senior's voice turned frosty. "Can't?"

"No, sir." Peter made himself meet the Senior's eyes. It wasn't as hard as he'd feared. "I know I have a duty to the Keep. I also have a duty to myself. There are three other fully trained Terrell Telepaths to choose from. The Keep doesn't need me. I have a right to decide what to do with my life."

"So you've decided to abandon the Keep? I can't believe one of my own blood could be so irresponsible." He glowered back at Peter. His mindshield was rock. "You can't turn your back on what you are. You're a Terrell, and the Terrells are the Keep. For a Telepath to deny the purpose of his talent—"

"Is the same as talent abuse? Then maybe you'd like to burn it out of me, like you're going to do to Lios."

The words burst free before he could stop them. The Senior's face paled. Peter had to turn away from the look in his grandfather's eyes. He found himself staring at the painting of Great Zorn. "I'm sorry," he murmured.

"So am I." The Senior's words, his voice, his thoughts were flat, all emotions screened away. "Very well. This is hardly the first time I've made

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a mistake. I won't stand in the way of your rights. Leave the Keep now, since you care so little for its welfare. I'll find a true Terrell to succeed me." He held out his hand for the schedule scroll Peter still clutched in his fist.

"Fine," Peter said. "You can name Jededias. He doesn't give a damn whose feelings he steps on, either."

He flung the crumpled scroll at the Senior's feet and stalked out of the office. Once in the hallway, he started to run. He reached the stairs to the roof and bolted up them three at a stride. His eyes burned, his vision blurred by tears.

Damn him, damn all Terrells, and Great Zorn, too—

He burst onto the roof and paused by the stairwell. His gaze swept the rooftop in hopes of finding a ptero to fly him away from the Keep. Today luck delighted in mocking him. The roof, usually impassably blocked by sunning reptilian bodies, this time hosted only one. Peter muttered a curse. Empath Sekke was Ephraim's bondsmate, and would obey no one but the Healer. He would never carry Peter anywhere without consulting Ephraim first.

The blue-gray ptero blinked sleepily as Peter crossed the roof and slammed himself down on the wall, where he slouched with legs dangling over the side, kicking his heels against the rock. When the reptile's attempt at pleasantry met with a blistering psiscreen, Sekke simply grunted and rubbed a patch of itchy hide against the low stone ledge. A physical Empath, he was attuned to the ills of the body, not the aches of the soul. Peter supposed he ought to be grateful Sekke wasn't yet another pushy Telepath.

He glared out at the green sea of forest, the blue sea beyond it a thin, shimmering line, all but hidden by the trees. He growled another oath, furious at the Senior, at himself, at his inability to escape the Keep. Great Zorn had ordered the Keep constructed on this mountaintop because there were no land approaches; the only way on or off was by pteroback. Zorn had feared retaliation from the Chosen, even with the desert between them. So Historian Hezekiel had taught them.

Zorn looked in the wrong place for his enemies. The danger comes from the people who say all they want is what's best for you. What they've *decided is best.*

Maybe he could try to climb down the cliffside. Maybe he would lose his grip and fall and snap his neck. That would settle matters neatly.

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No . . . that was a child's response. He had acted like a child before the Senior. *But I was right. The Keep doesn't need every Terrell. I can lead the life I choose without shirking my duty. Not even the Senior has the right to make that choice for somebody else.*

The violent kicking of his heels gradually slowed to a stop. *I know what he wants for me. Rasha wants the same for Cathal. But we should be allowed to choose. It isn't fair.*

Cathal. Peter hadn't seen the yearling in days, not since Rasha began her patrols. He needed to talk to someone, and Cathal would understand. Cathal would know how it felt to be forced into a slot because of his heritage.

Perhaps the yearling was within his range. Peter let his thoughts reach out, into the levels occupied by the normal mind-to-mind contact of pteros. He was certain he would recognize the smooth, iron feel of Cathal's mind if he touched it. Automatically, he tuned out Sekke's sleep-muzzy mumblings, and the colorful, though less powerful, broadcasts of the human Telepaths. Peter slimmed his beam to a thin band and lanced it away from the Keep.

Two pteros heard him, questioned, withdrew. Neither was Cathal. He touched a mind with a faint sweaty odor. That would be Barnar, instructing Beginners down on the beach. Peter hastily angled away and stretched his thoughts toward the palisades. The seaside cliffs lay beyond his range, but the concentration of pteros there was strongest. A mated pair hissed at him for disturbing their privacy, and a nestbound female chattered a halfhearted challenge, but for the most part they ignored him. Still no touch of iron.

He was about to turn to the forest, when he heard the scream.

Not in his ears. It shrieked inside his head, shrill and clawing, the cry of a giant bird caught by surprise, in agony. It sputtered to a whisper. Then stopped. Cut off. Another mind had tried to blunt it, slamming down like a stone wall between the scream and any chance listener. The echoes vibrated within Peter's mind, thin and faint and cold.

He cried out. Sekke, startled from his scratching, lurched to his feet. *What is it? What's wrong?*

"A scream—" Peter scrambled off the ledge. His heart was galloping. "Didn't you hear it? Somebody — a ptero — surprised, hurt—"

Sekke cocked his head and peered in the direction Peter had been

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facing. *I didn't hear a thing. Are you sure?*

"I thought—" He *had* been groping at the edge of his range. Maybe he was mistaken. . . .

No. Sekke was Empath, not Telepath, and did not have even a human Telepath's psychic range. Peter dashed across the roof and clambered onto the ptero's back. "It sounded like it was near the palisades. Take me there."

Ephraim—

"Bring him. We may need a Healer."

Sekke leaped off the roof and glided into the courtyard. A mental thrust at the Healer's wing brought Ephraim running. He swung himself onto Sekke's back, just behind Peter. "This better not be another prank, Pete."

Peter gripped Sekke's neck with his knees and thought, I hope so, too.

Even the scream's echoes had died to silence by now. Peter judged the direction as best he could from that brief and inaccurate touch. Near the palisades, but moving away from the beach. It had to be somewhere up in the dunes. So why was there no telepathic uproar from the pteros at the cliffs? Surely one of them must have heard it if he, a human, had.

Peter scanned in that direction and touched another mind, iron-cold. *Cathal?*

Peter! Even at this distance, the shout made him wince. *Call the Senior. Call Barnar. We'll need a Healer—*

Ephraim's with me. Sekke's bringing us. We're coming.

Sekke as well as Peter picked up Cathal's powerful broadcast. The ptero increased his speed. Peter, meanwhile, reached toward the shore for Barnar. He did not try to reach the Keep. Let Barnar notify the Senior. Peter preferred not to interrupt his grandfather's thoughts just then.

Barnar had been alerted and the Senior informed by the time Sekke reached the dunes. Cathal's green-and-gold form stood out against the bleached cream of the sand. His, and another's. Sekke hissed, and Ephraim swore. Peter remained silent, a cold stone where his heart had been, as Sekke circled to land near to where Cathal crouched beside the lifeless body of the Telepath Teacher.

By the time the Senior and Barnar arrived, Ephraim and Sekke had completed their examination of Rasha's body. "Heart failure," Ephraim pronounced, clapping sand from his robe. Sekke, who had followed the

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Healer's scan with his Empath senses, nodded confirmation. "She's been pushing herself to the brink this week, and we both know she's no hatchling. I figure she was flying one of her sweeps, when her heart just gave out on her."

No.

Pteros and humans turned to stare at Cathal. The yearling's tail kicked up sprays of sand as it coiled and snapped. *She was strong as a ptero ten years younger, and she knew her limits. This wasn't a heart attack any more than it was an accident.*

"Listen up, hatchling," Ephraim started. "I know a heart attack when I —"

"Cathal," the Senior's quiet voice cut off Ephraim's retort. "We all know you were fond of your aunt. I'm sorry; she was my friend as well. But she was getting old, and she had been overreaching herself. Obviously —"

"Obviously," you've decided to blind yourself to what's in front of you. Yes, her heart gave out — because she was pushed past her limits by an attacking Telepath. She was murdered.

The shock of Cathal's claim overrode his use of an insolent tone to the Senior. Simon cleared his throat. "That's impossible. Rasha was the strongest Telepath at the Keep. No one would dare —"

Lios dared. And did.

Peter's heart stuttered. The scream, shut off by another mind. . . .

"You saw this happen?" the Senior demanded of Cathal. "You have proof?"

Cathal sank his head between his shoulders and uttered a whisper of a hiss. His tailtip flicked. *No, Senior. I was scanning the woods when I heard her scream. I also heard another mind trying to block it. It had to be Lios. No one else would be strong enough, or crazy enough, to —*

"Barnar," the Senior said, "you were on the beach. Did you or any of your students hear Rasha scream? Or feel another presence?"

Barnar whimpered. He was a pale-eyed beast, so dark a green as to be almost black, with wan, mint-colored splotches on his throat and chest. He stared at the body of the Telepath Teacher. His nervous tail had dug a trench in the sand. *N-No, Senior. None of us heard a thing until Student Terrell called me.*

Of course Barnar didn't hear anything! Cathal roared. *I just told you: Lios blocked her! Can't you get it through your clogged brain he wanted this to look like a natural death!*

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Anger narrowed the Senior's eyes. "Student Cathal, you will not address me or any Teacher in that —"

"It's true," Peter blurted. "I heard her, too. From the Keep. There was a scream, then it got cut off, by . . . by someone else. I couldn't say who, but I know what I heard."

He would have said more, but his grandfather's glower caused him to stumble to a halt. The Senior turned to Ephraim. "Healer?"

"Well." Ephraim tugged on his beard. "I suppose it's possible. . . . Overexertion of any kind, mental or physical, in a beast her age — hell, Simon, I couldn't tell the difference!" He sent a silent plea to Sekke, who whined his own helplessness. "I can tell you only what Sekke and I found — death by heart failure. As for what brought it on, I couldn't say unless I'd been standing right next to her."

"But it's possible?"

"Possible? Sure. Probable? Not likely. Pteros don't go around killing each other. Not even the males at mating time. If you're suggesting one of her own students pushed her into a heart attack —"

He would and he did. Lios is insane.

Cathal's eyes sought and held the Senior's. Human and ptero measured each other. "But you didn't see him."

No, but —

"So all we have is an accusation from a pair of irresponsible children. Barnar, you and I will question the pteros at the palisades, see if one of them saw or heard something. Peter, Cathal, return to the Keep. We'll discuss your story when I get back." His voice lost a measure of its anger as he addressed the Healer. "Ephraim. . . ."

Ephraim nodded curtly. "We'll see to Rasha's body, Simon."

"Thank you." The Senior paused beside her. His hand caressed the sleek, bony thrust of her headcrest, his eyes soft with regret. When he raised his eyes to Peter's, that softness was gone. Peter dropped his own stare to the sand. *I know what I heard,* his thoughts repeated, though he couldn't be certain his grandfather heard him.

What about Lios! Cathal demanded.

The Senior favored Cathal with a long, chilly glare before turning his back on him to mount Barnar. "We'll continue the search until he's found. Barnar, you'll take charge of it, after we get back from the palisades."

Barnar leaped skyward in a great spray of sand, anxious to leave the

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smell of death behind. Cathal gouged the dune with his foot-claws, leaving ragged tracks. *That idiot! Can't he see—*

Not now, Peter hushed him. "Cathal can take me back to the Keep," he told Ephraim. He found his gaze drawn to Rasha's body, and he trembled. He had always thought of her as invulnerable, immortal, a permanent part of the Keep. If the Telepath Teacher could die. . . .

Ephraim misread Peter's expression. "Don't worry, Pete. We'll see she gets a pyre. She was Telepath Teacher. She deserves it."

"Th-thank you, Healer." Peter climbed onto Cathal's back. The yearling had grown deceptively quiet. He rose from the dunes with less panic than Barnar, but with no less speed. *Fool! he muttered. I don't care if he is your grandfather. How could he ignore Rasha's warnings! If he'd listened to her—*

"Sekke was with me," Peter tried to console him. "*He* knows I was telling the truth. He'll convince Ephraim. With them on our side, the Senior will have to listen to you."

The Senior doesn't listen to anything he doesn't want to hear. Peter didn't respond to that. *I'll try talking to Barnar. Rasha was right. No ptero can handle that level of power without going mad.*

Cathal picked up speed as he raced toward the Keep. Peter hung on without speaking. That was all they could do, until Lios was found. Hang on.

Barnar was guiding the class through warm-ups when Peter arrived, late. There seemed no more reason to hurry to class. Rasha was gone, her body loaded onto a raft and towed to sea, then set afire. It was an honor reserved only for Seniors, or very special Teachers. It did nothing to assuage the crushing emptiness inside him, or the sense of dread he tried to suppress, the presentiment of worse things to come, like the deceptive calm of the sea before a hurricane. He told himself the entire Keep felt so, that he was simply picking up the echoes of others' emotions, no more.

All advance students were present this morning, Peter noticed. The search for Lios had been postponed until after the Teachers held Assembly to appoint a new Telepath Teacher. In the interim, Barnar held the post. He was out of his depth and knew it, as evidenced by his frequent hops and tailjerks. Barnar could coax incredible performances from even the poorest hatchling Telepath, but adults upset him to the point of sheer terror.

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Peter observed the jumpy dart of the Teacher's eyes and recalled Cathal's comments on the ptero pecking order.

Cathal crouched apart from the others, solitary by choice and avoidance. Word had already whirlwinded among the students about the yearling's status. Though Rasha had intended he succeed her, he was to be passed over for the post. The Senior cited Keep law: only an adult could be named a Teacher. Cathal, for all his considerable talent, was only a year old, a hatchling. The students whispered of other, more serious breaches: a defiance of the Senior's orders, an unmentioned accusation that put the hatchling in disfavor. That, Peter figured, would be closer to the truth. Throughout their questioning last night, Cathal had clung to his assertions with a tenacity as strong as his talent, until the Senior, close to fury, threatened to remove him from the Keep. Even this morning, Cathal remained sour-tempered and unrepentant. Peter took his place in class at the hatchling's side. The others ignored them both. Cathal snorted sardonically, but his touch in Peter's mind was warm and grateful.

Barnar, fluttering his wings, was about to call the class to order, when Raphael shouted and pointed. Peter looked up as the slim shadow swept across the courtyard. The ptero landed just beyond the class, near the arched entrance to the Healer's wing. Barnar choked down a squawk of surprise. Peter, without realizing it, reached out to Cathal, whose snarl became the only sound in a sudden, heavy silence.

Lios turned to face the class. He was thinner than a week ago, his once-dark hide cracked and bleached, as if by prolonged exposure to the sun. He strutted forward, wings at half-spread, head high and neck extended, in the manner of a dominant male.

What are you doing here! The question should have come from Barnar. Cathal demanded it, head low and tail twisting. He took a step toward Lios, his own wings half-spread, cutting off Peter's view of the brown-and-gold Telepath. *You have no right —*

The Telepath Teacher's dead. The position belongs to the strongest. Lios's hiss challenged Barnar. The Teacher slunk aside, head sunk between his shoulders. Lios chortled his contempt and faced Cathal, as if they were the only two in the courtyard. *It's mine.*

The Senior decides who will be Teacher. Assembly —

Lios's psychic sneer cut the air between them like a knife. *Humans have no place in our affairs. Neither do hatchlings.* His beak sank lower,

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parallel to the stones. *Unless you think you can challenge me!*

Their tails smacked against the flagstones, almost in unison. Barnar whimpered and sidled away. There would be no help from him, or from the others in the class. This was challenge. Cathal's hatchling hiss was shriller than Lios's adult growl, but no less deadly. His mindshield had the feel of an iron wall.

An iron wall between Peter and Lios, which hid the boy from the ptero's sigh and scan.

Peter took the hint. He aimed a thin, tight beam at the Keep, at the Senior. His mind touched Simon's, a quick, informative flash before he darted away. There wasn't time for lengthy explanations. He groped next for Sekke. The Empath had a cooler head than Barnar. If Cathal could keep Lios occupied, maybe Sekke could slip away, bring help from town —

It was the tightest, most private broadcast Peter had ever attempted. Not tight enough. Lios heard him. The ptero screeched and half-rose into the air, trying to peer behind Cathal. *Who's back there! Who are you trying to hide!* He spotted Peter, and his laughter grated with hate. *Terrell. Bawling for help like a hatchling. Brainless —*

Humans have no place in our affairs. You said so yourself. Cathal beat his wings, trying to draw Lios's attention back to himself, away from Peter and the class. Lios's shield showed minute cracks; Peter could hear the sour leakage of his thoughts. The sandy roughness that had always been scraped on Peter's mind had dissolved into a swirl of red streaks and ragged edges. The dryness so characteristic of a ptero's thoughts had a greasy feel. It was like touching the mind of an injured animal.

"Lios."

Lios came down with a heavy thump and whirled toward the voice. Barnar whined in relief as the Senior strode into the courtyard. At the entrance to the Healer's wing stood Ephraim, the dark bulk of Sekke just behind him. Others, Teachers and their students, were gathering at the window, in the doorways. No one dared to move, not yet. Like Lios, they watched the Senior.

"Well, Lios. We've been looking for you." The Senior's voice was calm, powerful in its surety of command. That voice had won obedience from every ptero at the Keep from Rasha on down. Peter saw Lios shudder, as his automatic response of submission clashed with his drive to dominate. The ptero shrank away and growled, his mind loud and pulsing, streaks of

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sour flame. Even if the Senior hadn't heard that scarlet chaos, he could see the evidence of it in Lios's twitching wing-claws, the aggressive slant of his beak, the skitter of his tail across the flagstones. All could see it.

He's crazy, Peter realized. *He really is crazy. Even the Senior has to admit it. Grandfather, be careful—*

Quiet, Cathal warned him. *Start moving toward the Keep. I don't know if the Senior can hold him. If Lios starts blasting. . . .*

Those in the Keep had already recognized the danger. Peter noticed the Teachers shooing their charges away from the windows, into the safety of the Keep's interior. Magdalene, clutching her brother's hand, was inching toward the Healer's wing. Raphael shivered, as near to panic as the younger pteros. They had scented madness in one of their own, and it terrified them.

"So here you are, Lios," the Senior said. He pitched his voice to a soothing caress, weaving a gentle net around Lios's boiling mind. Lios growled, weaker than before, the sound offset by the violent thrashing of his tail. "We wondered where you'd got to."

Rasha's dead. Her position is mine.

"Of course. We couldn't find you to tell you. What's happened to your hide? How that must pain you! Come, we'll see the Healer. He can—"

Don't play games with me! Lios snapped. *No human tells me what to do. I've got the blood of Zorn. The Keep belongs to me. It's mine.*

"Certainly the Keep is yours. That's what we intended all along. Rasha said—"

Rasha, Lios hissed. *I know what Rasha intended. She wanted to burn out my talent. She didn't think I could handle it. Weak old lizard. Weak as a human.* His eyes glittered, wild and deadly, as he narrowed them at the Senior. *She couldn't stop me any more than you can.*

"No one wants to stop you, Lios. We want only to help." Now the Senior's voice turned brisk, a subtle demand for obedience. Lios clashed his beak. His tail grew still. The Senior took a step toward him. "Zorn's purpose here was to nurture talents, not destroy them. The Telepaths don't cripple their own. Come with me; we'll discuss it in the Healer's wing." His thoughts reached out to Lios.

Cathal screamed a warning, too late. The Senior was a powerful Telepath — a threat to any other Telepath who considered himself in command. The Senior's mindtouch, though gentle as a breath of air, acted like

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salt in the open sore of Lios's pteroan instincts. Lios's screech was charged with a hunger for death.

Weakling. Human.

Lios's point-blank psiblast hurled the Senior the length of the courtyard, into the wall of the Keep. Simon Terrell's last flash of thought ripped through Peter's awareness, a white flare of astonishment. Then silence. Peter's mind throbbed numb denial as he stared at the burned body in the golden robe, crumpled at the foot of the wall.

With a roar, Lios turned on the class.

A wave of scarlet force battered Peter to his knees. He thought he saw Magdalene fall, charred as if struck by a blast by lightning, Raphael ripped from her grasp. The air filled with screams and the crack of wings and the stench of burnt leather and flesh. Barnar's squall of terror was drowned beneath Sekke's bellow as the Empath hurled himself at Lios. The electric crack of a psibolt threw Sekke aside, his howl of agony echoed by Ephraim as their link carried the blow to his bondsmate. Crimson fire filled the courtyard, searing Peter's thoughts.

Suddenly a barrier closed over Peter's mind, a dome of cold iron that protected his brain as a green pteroan form protected his body. *Hold your shields!* Cathal roared at the others. *Damn you, we outnumber him! We can burn him out if we hold together!*

Lios's response was a screech of red hate that crashed against Cathal's defense. The dome held firm. Unable to see or to scan, Peter could only huddle behind Cathal's body and pray enough of the class was left to obey.

An eternity of sound clawed at his ears — shrieks of rage and screeches of pain, and Cathal's furious, frustrated shouting. Abruptly, the yearling snapped open his wings and half-rose with a bark of challenge. Peter heard the meaty thud of colliding bodies, saw a brown beak slice toward Cathal's throat. Cathal staggered and overbalanced, toppling backward onto the human he had tried to shield. A wall of green filled Peter's eyes; fire and iron closed over his mind. Then nothing.

Pounding. His head was pounding. The steady, insistent throb forced him awake. He could hear the hum of a ptero's thoughtvoice, but the sound was muffled, as if his mind were smothered in cotton. A heavy dead weight pressed on top of his shins. Somebody muttered curses a universe away.

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A thought prickled the base of his memory, something urgent. It had to do with one of the Telepaths.

Lios. It's Lios. He's gone insane. I have to warn the Senior.

Peter opened his eyes. And remembered.

Peter! Sekke's voice hit Peter's bruised mind like a fist. The Empath instantly withdrew. *Ephraim, Peter's awake.*

Another curse, this time of relief. "Thank God. We can't afford to lose another one."

Peter's awareness of his surroundings began to focus. He found himself on a cot in the Healer's wing, his body swathed in a blanket. Every bone within him ached. He struggled to sit up; Ephraim pressed him back down, with a firmness that warned against argument. "Don't you move. Lie still and get your strength back. You're gonna feel weak for a while; I had to burn off a lot of energy knitting your bones back together. Zorn's arse. Only a Telepath would be foolish enough to let a ptero fall on top of him."

Sekke added something Peter couldn't catch. He could barely hear the ptero, though Sekke squatted at his bedside not three feet away. A rush of soul-deep panic shook him. Sekke sensed his fear and guessed the cause. Rather than touch Peter's sore mind again, he told Ephraim. "Your talent's intact, Pete," the Healer assured him. "Must ache like hell right now, but you'll recover. You owe that hatchling Cathal for that. His mindshield saved your talent . . . and your life."

Cathal! Peter tried to speak. His question came out a rasp from a throat so raw it felt as if claws had scored it. "Take a gander," Ephraim said, and jerked his chin at the opposite side of the cot. Cathal lay there, asleep on the floor. The weight across Peter's legs was the yearling's tail. "He's fine. Had a couple of gashes, nothing serious. Tough little critter. Only one of the bunch kept his head. He's been helping Sekke and me with the sur— with the rest of the class. Got a head for organization, he does. Rasha trained him well."

Blunted talent or no, Peter heard with chilling clarity the word the Healer had started to say. He did not ask if anyone else was dead. He croaked instead, "How many?"

Sekke rumbled. Ephraim rubbed the ptero's neck to quiet him. "Most of the pteros ran when Lios started psiblasting. Tomi and Reth tried to stop him. He . . . crippled them. Burned out stretches of their brains. Reth will recover, but he'll never hit Telepath level again. Tomi . . . Tomi's heart gave

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out. Like Rasha's. We lost her, and the Fisher twins. And the Senior."

In terse, colorless sentences, he told Peter the rest of the tale. Lios's first strike killed Magdalene and Raphael, and drove the others to flight. The class could not be blamed; most of them were adolescents, ill-prepared by both training and instincts for such behavior in an adult. Tomi and Reth were two-years-olds, the same age as Lios. They tried to obey Cathal's order to close ranks on their attacker, and paid for it. Barnar was gone, had fled at the Senior's death. That left only Cathal, whose iron defense held solid against Lios's fiercest assault. Furious, Lios at last resorted to a physical attack, counting on his superior size and weight to overcome the hatchling.

His preoccupation with the yearling gave Sekke a chance to recover. Intent upon Cathal, Lios was unprepared for the Empath's rush. Sekke was ten years Lios's senior, a hard-muscled veteran of many a battle. Realizing he was overmatched, Lios fought free with a vicious mindthrust, abandoned his attack, and fled the Keep.

"Sekke chased him a little ways, but lost him in the mountains," Ephraim finished. Sekke whined. The Healer patted his beak to assure him he placed no blame on his bondsmate. His huge hand clasped Peter's shoulder. "I'm sorry, Pete. About Rasha. And Simon."

Peter neither moved nor spoke, his soul as numb as his mind. His grandfather was dead. Ephraim poured a cup of watered wine and held it to Peter's lips. The few sips he could manage restored his voice and a measure of his strength. This time when he spoke, his words emerged cracked but understandable. "The Keep. . . . Who's in charge?"

"Well. . . ." Ephraim shared a shrug with Sekke. "Nobody, I guess. We've sort of been running on momentum since this morning. Nobody knows what to do. The Keep's been without a Senior and a Telepath Teacher before, but never both at the same time. We're going to hold Assembly tonight, try to figure out some answers. God*damn*!" He ran his hand through his hair, starting with the thick ebon thatch on his head and down into his shaggy beard. "Wish Simon hadn't been so closedmouthed about his doings. We all know Rasha wanted Cathal to take over as Telepath Teacer, she never made a big secret of it. Simon never said a word about who'd follow *him*. Guess we'll have to appoint your brother Jededias — nobody's first choice, but all we've got. Unless Simon mentioned somebody to you?"

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He let the question dangle. Peter's hand strayed over the side of the cot to rest on Cathal's headcrest. It wasn't fair. None of this was fair. For a Terrell the welfare of the Keep must always come first.

"We . . . talked about my taking over," Peter heard himself whisper at last. "He wanted me to. . . ."

No. Zorn's eyes, no. Even as he spoke, he remembered. The irony left a flat taste in his mouth. Only an adult could be Teacher. Or Senior. Peter was fifteen, a year too young. He shut his eyes and hardly felt the press of Ephraim's hand.

"So now Simon's gone, and you're still a kid. Zorn's arse. We can't afford to hold off for a year. For any other post, maybe. Not for Senior." Ephraim clenched and unclenched his big hands, as if he wanted to break something. "Guess we'll have to call in Jededias, after all. I'll bring it up in Assembly." He moved away from the cot, mumbling oaths under his breath. "You try to get some sleep now, Pete. Tomorrow's gonna be hell for everybody."

Ephraim and Sekke went out. Peter lay awake, his fingers brushing the sleeping Cathal's headcrest, his mind in turmoil. He dug into his memories of Hezekiel's classes, trying to recall any incident involving an insane Telepath, what those at the Keep had done. What procedures must be followed in the case of a murdered Senior.

Rasha . . . Grandfather . . . Great Zorn, what will happen to the Keep!

His ears caught a hiss, and the ragged scratch of uneasy foot-claws overhead. Though his range was still sharply limited, Peter managed to pick up a faint buzz of thoughtwaves, skittish and watchful. A ptero called harsh challenge to another approaching the Keep.

For the first time in nearly four hundred years, someone had stationed Telepath sentries on the roof.

PETER WAS jolted from a restless sleep by the furious screech of a ptero. He recognized Cathal at once, by the unmistakable impression of iron that blasted him from the courtyard. Ephraim he recognized by the particularly juicy oath that answered Cathal's screech. "The Teachers already voted, hatchling. It's decided."

You're making a mistake, Cathal began, and was silenced by a deafening growl that had to come from Sekke. Peter swung himself off the cot, then had to grab for the headboard to steady himself as the weakness

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Ephraim had warned him about flooded his body. He forced his complaining body erect and made it abandon the comfort of the cot and step through the archway into the courtyard.

"It's not open to question, hatchling. Especially not by a student." Ephraim's cracked voice reflected his exhaustion. Sekke loomed protectively at his shoulder. Cathal confronted them both, as unshakable now as when he had faced the Senior. "The Teachers decided—"

They decided wrong. What's it going to take to make you understand! Another death! Cathal glanced back over his shoulder at Peter, not at all surprised to see him there. *Peter, tell him. You heard Lios's mind. Tell the Healer what's happened to him, why we have to stop him.*

Peter stepped to Cathal's side, and laid his arm across the hatchling's neck. "What did Assembly decide?" he asked Ephraim.

The Healer sighed. "Not bloody much. One thing we all agreed on: Lios's talent has to be cut back. Trouble is, we have to catch him first. Barnar's gone out to the palisades, see if he can scrounge up a couple adult Telepaths. Once we've got him, maybe we can cure him."

If you can, Cathal said. *Assuming you can even get near him in his present state. It may not be possible now.*

"No? You saying Lios has soared so far over the edge that he can't be hauled back?"

He's killed five Telepaths and crippled another. Are you sure you want to try!

Ephraim glowered. Sekke rumbled a warning. The Healer patted his bondsmate's beak to shush him. "Lios is sick. If there's any chance to help him, we have to take it. I'd even do that for you, you puffed-up little nit. If we can reach him—"

You can't. Iron filled the courtyard. It made Cathal seem larger than he was. *I can't believe this. Bound brain and being to a ptero, and you still don't understand a ptero's mind. What do you think you're going to reach! Some spark of better judgment! His soul! We're animals, Healer. An animal has no morals or compassion. Lios's rationality is gone. He's running on a Telepath's instinct now — the drive to destroy any mind he touches that's weaker than his own. He's going to kill and keep on killing unless we kill him first.*

"You figure that'd be a mercy, huh? Or maybe it's just revenge you're after, because he murdered Rasha. C'mon, Telepath, let's have the truth.

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You say you heard his mind. Is Lios so far gone he can't be helped?"

I was busy saving my life and Peter's, Cathal snapped. *There wasn't time to examine him.*

"Uh-huh. What about it, Pete? What's your assessment?"

Peter tightened his grip on Cathal's neck. When he closed his eyes, he could see his grandfather's body, a charred mound lying on the stones. He couldn't speak.

Ephraim took his silence for agreement. "There, y'see? Even Pete backs me up. Not that it makes a difference. We're going to take Lios alive. *Alive,*" he spat at Cathal. "That's what Assembly decided, and you're going to abide by it."

Cathal sank his head low and growled, causing Sekke to lower himself into a crouch very close to challenge. *I don't have to abide by a mistake. Especially a fatal one.* He sidestepped away from Peter and sprang into the sky, his anger evident by the swipe of his wings. Sekke held his crouch and did not relax until Cathal was out of sight.

"Zorn's arse." Ephraim scrubbed one beefy hand across his eyes. "Just once I'd like to talk to a Telepath who thinks before he acts." He stumbled into the Healer's wing, Sekke at his heels. Peter followed them, pausing just outside the entrance.

Sekke went to a corner and squatted down, carefully arranging his wings. Ephraim rummaged through his cupboards for jars of herbs and salves, which he set on his wooden worktable. The capture of the rogue Telepath would not be accomplished without injuries. Sekke's bark alerted Ephraim to their company. "Eh, Pete. Forgot about you. Hang on. It'll be over soon."

"I know. I just wanted to ask. . . ." He swallowed. "Can I help somehow?"

"Yeah. You can get some breakfast into that skinny frame of yours. You look like death gone bad. Like me. Fine example we're setting for the hatchlings."

"Healer . . . about Lios. What happens if you can't cure him?"

"Then we'll . . . we'll worry about that after we catch him. Zorn's arse. Four centuries, smooth as the sea, and then . . . damn it all to hell!" Ephraim slammed his fist down on the table, upsetting the jars as well as Sekke, who half-rose with a squawk. Wood splintered. Blood dripped into the crack.

"Four hundred years," Ephraim muttered. "The Keep's supposed to be

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the place to discipline talent. Learn control. It was supposed to prevent this sort of thing!"

Sekke whimpered. *Ephraim — your hand —*

"Huh? Oh. Yeah." The Healer scowled at his injured hand. The blood flow stopped. The cut closed as if by its own will, its attendant bruise fading. Ephraim wiped the residue of blood on his robe. "Damn. Shame all our problems can't be fixed that easy. What the hell ever happened to simple answers?" He gave a weary grin to Peter. "Get out of here, Pete. Grab yourself some food. If I had any sense, I'd go with you. Zorn's arse. I'm getting as wiffy as a Telepath."

Peter left the Healer's wing and made his way to the dining hall, where he ate a sparse meal he barely tasted and afterward couldn't remember. For a while he wandered the halls of the Keep, letting his feet carry him where they would, his thoughts turned deep within.

He ended up at last in the Senior's office. The room was deserted now, dim, the shutters locked. He spent the afternoon sitting behind the desk, staring at the painting of Great Zorn.

Is this why you ordered certain talents destroyed? Because a ptero's instincts always clash with its power? But you were a ptero yourself, the most powerful Telepath ever hatched. You couldn't have been insane, not and accomplished all you did. Somehow you must have mastered your talent, defied pteroan instincts. How? What were you, that you could control all that power without going mad?

Barnar's whistle and the crack of wings snapped Peter out of his reverie. He unlatched the shutters and peered outside. Barnar had returned with his Telepath force. Six pteros, two with bondsmates. Enough to stop Lios? Perhaps. Perhaps not.

Peter clicked the shutters closed. And finally acknowledged the decision he'd come to in the Healer's wing. There *was* a simple answer. The only one left.

Unnoticed, Peter descended into the depths of the Keep. Here the children of the town, as well as the talents-in-training, learned their letters and ciphering. The kitchen was down here, and the gymnasium, and the armory.

He chose a spear from the rack, then discarded it in favor of a bow. He was better at archery. Besides, the bow and arrow offered greater range and accuracy. When one attacked a Telepath, distance was vital.

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It isn't vengeance, he tried to convince himself. *It's justice. Lios killed the Senior. I have to do this. It's the only way.*

He crept up the steps to the courtyard, taking care not to be seen. With luck, no one would notice him leaving the Keep. It would be difficult, climbing down the cliffside, but with a rope and God's good fortune. . . .

He emerged into the day's last sunlight, and bumped into Cathal's gold belly. *So here you are. I've been looking for you.*

"Uh . . . ," Peter stammered, aware of the bow and quiver in his hands. "I've been, um, thinking. . . ."

So I see. The hatchling eyed the weapons significantly. *Well? Are you going to get on my back, or did you intend to sprout wings?*

Outmaneuvered again. This time he was grateful. Cathal scanned for watchers, found none, and bore Peter away from the Keep. "Lios needs water and food," Peter said. "I figure he must be near the river. We'll start there and circle out—"

That won't be necessary. I know where he is.

Peter had never been to the desert at dusk. It lay just past the mountains, beyond the bare stone piles of the foothills, a scorched waste of sand and rock that stretched to the western horizon. Already much of the day's heat had bled away; the air displaced by Cathal's wings had a chill bite to it. No pteros or humans lived this far inland, for there was little game and less water. Peter's ancestors had named it Hell.

He shivered, and tugged his robe tighter about him, his knees pressing into Cathal's neck. "What makes you think he's here?"

He has to be. It's the only place we didn't extensively search. You saw how haggard he was, how thin. It should have occurred to me sooner. Rasha and I never came here ourselves, and he could have blocked himself from anyone else. The isolation would be perfect for exercising his talent.

Peter stared out across the barren expanse. Four hundred years ago, Great Zorn had led his people across that waste to Canaan. He left as his legacy the Keep, the Teachers, and his talent in the blood and brains of his descendents, such as Rasha and Cathal. And Lios.

Had Zorn been mad, as Rasha maintained? Had he bequeathed his madness to his descendants as well?

Ah, Cathal's thoughtvoice interrupted. *Look there.*

The ptero dipped low over an island of green that lay at the edge of the

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desert. This oasis had welcomed the outcast Chosen who followed Great Zorn into Hell. Cathal landed on the thin blanket of grass that bordered the little spring. The rivulet had been dammed to create a pool, refreshment for any other travelers who might try to brave Hell's extremes.

Cathal hissed, and hopped sideways to avoid stepping on a pile of small, round stones. No, not stones, as Peter's nose quickly corrected him. Ptero droppings. There were dry and crumbly, days old. The mud at the rim of the pool held a set of deep gouges, dug by the pressure of foot-claws.

"He isn't here now," Peter murmured.

No, Cathal agreed. *But he's near.*

They took to the air again. "If you suspected Lios was here," Peter said, "why didn't you tell the Teachers?"

Because we've had enough deaths. The Teachers think numbers will bring him down. Bah. That didn't work when I tried it. We could have stopped him, Reth and Tomi and I. If we'd linked, attacked him as one mind with the strength of three. . . . They wouldn't listen. They went at him one at a time, and he cut them down, one at a time. They never had a chance.

"They were students. These are adults. They're older, more experienced than Lios. Maybe—"

Don't count on it. Pteros don't understand teamwork. Lios will destroy any human mind he hears. Without humans to guide them, the pteros will run the second Lios attacks. We'll defend our nests and hatchlings and bondsmates, but to risk our own lives for no tangible reason? Ha! In a life-or-death situation, a ptero will save itself.

"You're risking your life by coming here."

For me, it's a matter of self-preservation. I'm as great a threat to him as Rasha was. It took him longer to realize that. He was fooled by my age, like everyone else. Everyone but you.

The desert fell away behind them. The jagged slopes of the foothills rose up from the shadowed, stony floor. Here and there weathered columns of rock stood like stern guardians at the border of Canaan. "You came back to get me. Why?"

Because you're fool enough to go after him alone, and we don't need another dead Terrell. He cackled over the sour objection Peter beamed at him. *We've both got good reasons to stop him. Together we might accomplish something.*

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Something. Definitely something. Peter drew an arrow from his quiver and fit it to the bowstring. His eyes scanned the terrain below; jumbled rocks; coarse, straggly plants; blotches of black beneath piles of boulders.

Gold eyes.

Peter felt a scream build up inside him. "Cathal!"

Lios came at them from below, from behind the rocks, his brown hide all but invisible against the shadows and stone. Braced for a mental attack, Cathal wasn't prepared for the physical shock as Lios crashed into him. Neither was Peter. Only a desperate grab at Cathal's headcrest saved him from being hurled from the yearling's back. Lios's foot-claws raked Cathal's side. His beak clattered against the hatchling's neck as he tried to slash at Peter.

Cathal struck back, with his mind. Lios reeled, his brain afire, shrieking. Cathal dove for the ground. *Jump,* he ordered. *You're too vulnerable on my back. I'll hold his attention until you can get a clear shot.*

Peter jumped. He landed badly in the dark; a bright flash of fire up his left leg betokened a sprain, or worse. He managed to keep his grip on his bow, but the quiver went flying, the arrows scattered. He groped through weeds and gravel for them as Cathal rose to meet Lios.

They came together in a clash of claws and minds — Lios screeching, Cathal silent — wings buffeting the air. Lios was half again larger than the hatchling, lean and supple. Cathal's size belied his strength, physical and psionic. Time and again Lios lunged, only to be shaken by a tight and piercing psibolt. His own greasy blasts splattered against the iron wall of Cathal's shield. In minutes the older beast was forced on the mental defensive.

Peter shut his mind against Lios's mad shrieks as he searched frantically for his arrows. Zorn's eyes, where had they got to? — There! One lay in the dirt before him, miraculously whole. He pounced on the shaft and nocked it to his bowstring, and turned to stare up at the sky.

Both pteros were bleeding, and panting for breath. Cathal's body was scored in a dozen places, his green-and-gold hide smeared with red. Lios had fewer physical wounds, but his mind pounded in black pain. Unexpectedly, he darted in, as if to close with Cathal again. At the last second, he swerved. His beak sliced through the taut leather of Cathal's left wing and snapped shut on the narrow, elongated fingers. Bone shattered. Screaming, Cathal retaliated with a psiblast that would have killed or

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crippled a ptero of lesser ability. Lios was hurled away like a sheaf of scroll paper. But the damage was done. Cathal plummeted toward the ground, his right wing pumping desperately to slow his fall. He hit somewhere behind a jumble of boulders several yards away.

Don't think about him now, Peter ordered himself. At least he was still alive. So was Lios, airborne but stunned. The ptero's swirling thoughts were hot and red as blood. Peter sighted on the gold of his throat, turned to molten copper by the moonlight. He would get only this one chance.

Great Zorn established the Keep to train us, so we could control our talents. So things like this would never happen. In four hundred years, no Telepath has ever killed another.

He murdered Rasha. He murdered my grandfather.

Peter took aim at the base of the throat, the point where a ptero's hide is thinnest. He fought to steady his hands. Lios was beginning to recover. The ptero's hot eyes raked the desert floor as he screamed his hatred of all that lived.

God help me . . . I can't. I can't do it.

Lios saw him. Their eyes clashed.

The psibolt hit him like a kick in the face. Peter landed on his back ten feet away, the breath pummeled out of him, his bow and arrow lost. His mind blistered as if boiled by the heat of the sun. In desperation he reached out to Cathal and found his thoughts blocked by a wet, grassy barrier that flared scarlet with the dank touch of madness. He shrank from the raw, throbbing pain of it. The barrier closed around his mind, and he could not prevent it.

Lios landed beside him. His thoughts buffeted Peter, loud and vicious. Electric agony tingled along every nerve in Peter's body, from his brain and spinal cord out to his fingertips and toes. Red haze swam behind his eyes. The volume was almost beyond his limit to counter; a non-Telepath would already be dead, nervous system overloaded by the too-powerful pteroan thoughts, nerves and flesh burned to ash. Like the Senior.

Human. Lios sniffed and rumbled. *Terrell.* His thoughtvoice shrilled of a torrent of jumbled emotions. Great gaps widened in his shield. Peter glimpsed a crimson maelstrom, ragged slashes of pain and power, too loud and fast for a human to withstand. When he tried to shut his shield against it, Lios tightened the barrier. Blood began to leak from Peter's ears and nose.

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Lios snarled and moaned, instincts clashing. His foot-claws rent the ground by Peter's head with deep, ferocious strokes. Peter dared not cry for help. Who would hear him, anyway? The Keep was miles away. He expected no more help from Cathal. Faced with a life-or-death situation, pteros saved themselves.

He felt the rancid blast of Lios's thoughts, fast and rank with madness. Lios chittered. No need to close the trap any further. Here was prey, helpless flesh to be torn with beak and claw.

Lios lunged at Peter, full into the path of a psibolt.

The echoes alone from the blast made Peter writhe. Lios was knocked to one side, his nerves momentarily numbed by the force of it. He flailed with wings and tail, staggering for footing. A second psiblast battered him into the earth, down, away from Peter.

Cathal clawed his way around the stand of rocks he'd used to hide his approach. His tattered left wing dragged behind him, the fractured wing-fingers crooked at unnatural angles. His right wing he held at half-extension, head sunk low, tail scraping the ground. Challenge.

Lios screamed and batted the air with his wings. When he tried to rise, Cathal blasted him back to the ground. A flicker of a whisper touched Peter's mind, a brief taste of iron, caring, concern. It vanished as Lios attacked.

The brown-and-gold Telepath roared and loosed a blast meant to shrivel all within his range. It shattered against Cathal's shield. They parried back and forth — Lios clawing the air and screeching, Cathal still as rock —in deadly silence. Between them lay Peter, paralyzed, unable even to crawl for the rocks. The air was charged with violent psionic energies that threatened to thrust into Peter's skull and burst it from within. Peter clung to his shields with all the strength left to him, with all the control Rasha had taught him. One slip, one crack, would finish him.

He clapped his hands to the ears, and felt the hot blood running freely there. Thinner trickles from his nostrils dribbled down his lips and chin as he panted for breath. The pteros' psiblasts vibrated inside his mind, now lashing crimson fire, now cold iron. He heard Lios's shrieks as if from a planet away.

They were locked in a matchbeam. Evenly partnered, they thrust at each other, each increasing the force of his broadcast to batter the shields of the other. Sooner or later one would reach his limit; his shields would

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give way, his brain would overload, and he would die.

Cathal held firm against Lios's fire, solid as a fully trained adult. His strength was incredible, a level Peter had never heard in so young a beast, tightbeamed at a breakneck pace. Even Lios, fueled more by insanity than skill, could not blunt the yearling's attack. The scarlet flame began to give way, smothered by the steady press of iron.

Lios screamed in terror. Lost in madness, he could not feel, as Peter could, the trembling behind Cathal's assault, the effort to hold his psi-beam taut so that he excised only the talent portion of Lios's brain and nothing else. Lios had become an animal, his only thought survival at any cost. In his blind fear, the urgency to escape overran all other needs. Even the need to hold his shields.

Peter's mind filled with light, like a white-hot bolt of silent lightning. Lios began a shriek; the light devoured the cry before he could finish it. The dry stench of scorched leather and cindered nerves hung heavy in the air. And silence, empty even of the feel of iron.

Little by little, Peter forced his aching body out of its fetal huddle. His mind was too sore to scan; he lifted his head and looked around. Off to his right lay what remained of Lios, a ptero-sized pile of bone and burnt hide, the brain and nervous system consumed by Cathal's psibolt. The air still crackled with the echoes of it. Peter elbowed himself into a sitting position and turned toward the source.

Cathal hunched a short distance away, his right wing as limp as his torn left, his tail completely still. His body shivered like beach grass in the wind. His eyes were fixed on Lios's corpse.

Peter tried to stand. His legs buckled. On hands and knees, he crawled to Cathal's side. The ptero stared blindly past him. For the first time, he actually looked his age, a hatchling barely a year out of the egg. For the first time also, his shields had slipped. Peter could see inside his mind.

He touched a rapid rush of thought, too fast for him to fully comprehend, running in strange and unreptilian channels. Accustomed to the simple, straightforward feel of a ptero's broadcasts, Peter was stunned by the layered complexity of the yearling's mind. The intensity forced him back behind his own unsteady shields. Even here he still felt the speed and roil of the hatchling's thoughts.

Cathal squawked, startled, when Peter touched him. Using the ptero's body to support himself, Peter managed to stand. Cathal moaned and

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pressed his beak against Peter's chest, like a hatchling trying to hide beneath its mother's wing. *I wasn't going to kill him. I meant only to burn out his talent. I didn't mean to kill him.*

"I know. . . ."

I kept rushing the match, pushing him. . . . I wanted to end it fast. . . . His shields just fell; I couldn't stop in time. . . .

"It's all right. . . ."

It is not *all right! Look what I did to him!* He jerked his beak away from Peter to stab it at Lios's body. *He was an adult at the peak of his power, and I killed him. I didn't even reach my own limit.*

Cathal yanked his thoughts beyond Peter's hearing and shut them up behind an iron shield. His body shuddered under Peter's hands. "It wasn't your fault," Peter said. "Lios panicked. He killed himself. You couldn't—"

You've got to burn it out of me.

"What? Cathal—"

Rasha was right. Power at this level can't be controlled. Certainly not by an animal ruled by its instincts. Peter, please. Burn it out of me now, before I reach my full strength.

"I can't. . . ."

What's the matter with you! Cathal shouted. *Hasn't any of this taught you anything! I hatched with my talent already functioning. It's been growing since I left the egg. I'm a year old, and my level's already past an adult's. How strong will I be when I get my full growth! I heard Lios's mind. His power was burning away his own brain. I don't want to die that way, or kill anyone else if I lose control. And I will. I might even turn on you, and I couldn't bear that. It's better not to take any chances.*

"Great Zorn—"

I don't want to hear his name again! It's all a lie, anyway. Great Zorn couldn't have been a ptero. An animal can never be trusted with a psi talent. We end up destroying all around us.

"Zorn was—," Peter started to say, and stopped. "He wasn't a ptero," he murmured. "That has to be the answer. He *wasn't* a ptero!"

What!

"Zorn wasn't a ptero. I mean, he was, but his mind wasn't; that's how he controlled his talent." Cathal was staring at him. Peter gulped and tried to order his thoughts before his started again. "It's what Rasha was talking about, the difference between humans and pteros. Great Zorn was . . .

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something new. His brain had changed somehow to handle his Telepath talent; that's why he didn't act like a ptero. Cathal, that has to be it! Zorn wasn't insane. He never had to defy instinct, because instinct never controlled him."

Cathal's head sank low. *That isn't possible.*

"But it explains everything. Why he behaved the way he did. Why he set up the Keep. He knew the power could be controlled, if the talent were trained to handle it. His own existence proved it. It doesn't have to lead to madness, not if it's caught in time."

That's true for a human. Not for us. The instincts—

"Didn't rule Zorn. Maybe they don't always rule his descendants. If his difference as well as his talent were passed to his hatchlings—"

You'd have a gaggle of crazy lizards who deserved to have their talent destroyed. Who could spot the difference, anyway, in time for training to matter! Who would know!

"Humans would," Peter said. "Human . . . Telepaths. . . ." He began to tremble, as the full scope of Great Zorn's long-ago plan became clear to him. "The Terrells. Zorn trained the Terrell Telepaths himself. He put them in charge of the Keep to watch for the ptero Telepaths. That's why humans run the Keep. Pteros wouldn't know; they don't have that human difference. Only . . . Zorn did. He was human himself. And he knew. He—"

Cathal growled, a sound of fear. Peter stared up into the hatchling's eyes — the brilliant gold eyes that had always seemed too direct and intense for an animal's.

"He knew," Peter whispered. "Just like you knew. You've known all along."

Cathal whined and rustled his shredded wing. He turned his head and would not meet Peter's eyes. *I've known since I hatched that I was different. It wasn't until I touched your mind — a human Telepath's mind —that I began to realize just how different.* He thumped his tail against the earth. *I didn't ask for this. I don't want it. If this is what having Zorn's talent means, then I'd rather believe he was crazy.*

"Maybe being human means to be a little crazy." Peter rubbed Cathal's head and crest. "You can do it. You won't kill anyone. You won't go mad. You'll be able to control it, like Zorn did."

Will I! What if you're wrong! And what do we tell the Teachers! How do we explain this! He jabbed his beak toward the burned mound that had

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been Lios. *They may decide to limit my talent, anyway, when they see what I'm capable of. After this, I couldn't even blame them.*

"They won't. They can't. *You* can't. I won't let you. Your talent is the reason Zorn established the Keep. You can't just give up, throw away your heritage. You owe it to Great Zorn to give yourself a chance." Peter grabbed Cathal's beak and forced his head around so that the hatchling had to meet his eyes. "You hear me, Telepath?"

Cathal vented a low, weak hiss. His tail snapped once, then quieted. Peter released him. His hand stroked the warm gold of Cathal's throat, a touch meant more to comfort himself than the hatchling. "We can't turn our backs on what we are, either of us. You're Great Zorn's heir. *You're* the purpose of Zorn's Keep. Zorn trained the Terrells to look after his children. That's my purpose, to look after you. Even if I'm never named Senior, I'll always be here to help you."

The hatchling sighed and traced the tip of his beak along the length of Peter's face, a bondsmate touch. *Damned Terrell. Thickheaded as your grandfather . . . hmm!*

Cathal raised his head to listen. Peter, whose strained mind could hear only a few yards, squinted into the sky. He thought he noticed a smudge in the east, blotting out the stars.

Ephraim and Sekke, Cathal said, *and I believe . . . yes, Barnar. He's got his Telepaths with him. Someone flying a sweep must have heard us. Peter . . . what do we tell them!*

Peter hesitated. He could make out individuals now: huge, thick-tailed Sekke; Ephraim on his back; and the smaller, slighter Barnar behind them; the other Telepaths trailing the leaders still a shapeless mass. As the party grew clearer to his eyes, the answer grew clearer in his mind. "I know what to say to them. Leave it to me."

"There we go. Give it a shot, Pete."

Peter swung his leg off the cot and gingerly set his foot on the floor. His rebuilt ankle took the weight of his leg, then his body, with a bit of a twinge, but no real pain. "It feels fine. Thank you, Healer."

"Hmp. I wouldn't go dancing on it for a couple of days, if I were you. Give it a rest. You break it again, *you* heal it." Ephraim scowled at the whistles outside, where Cathal was testing his regenerated wing under Sekke's supervision. "Will you listen to him? Wouldn't know he'd been

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in a fight to the death less than three hours ago. Hatchlings." He directed the scowl at Peter. "You two took a helluva risk, y'know. Lios could've crippled you, or worse."

Peter shrugged. "Cathal insisted. He felt he owed it to Rasha. You know how stubborn he is." Ephraim snorted. "Lios was already pretty weak when we found him. I think . . . maybe we could have saved him, if he hadn't. . . ."

"You two did all you could, Pete. Don't blame yourselves." He started to put away his herb jars. "Huh. Suicide. Never heard of a ptero killing itself. That's a Telepath for you. Zorn's arse, you're a crazy breed."

The Healer turned to open his medicine cupboard, and Peter released a nervous breath he'd been holding. Ephraim wasn't easily fooled. The other Teachers had accepted Peter's story without question. Nothing else explained the state of Lios's corpse. No human had the strength to do that to a ptero . . . and Cathal was only a hatchling.

Peter took a step, testing his ankle. It held. Satisfied, he started for the archway.

"Pete."

Zorn's eyes, here it comes. . . . "Yes, Healer?"

Ephraim thrust his chin at the courtyard, toward the sound of Cathal's exultant shrilling. "He's still a hatchling, Pete. You keep an eye on him. See he doesn't overreach himself."

"Yes, Healer."

The courtyard was crammed to capacity, students chattering, gawking, elbowing each other, the air tingling with excitement. On the roof, pteros hissed and snapped, challenging each other for space. The appointment of a Senior was a rare and important occasion, not to be missed.

Peter stood at attention beside the fountain as Assembly named Jedediah Terrell to the position of Senior. At Ephraim's curt gesture, Peter stepped to his brother's side to be named Senior's aide, not a common post but not unknown, according to the Historian. In the old days, it had been customary for the Senior to name and train an apprentice. This time the Keep would take no chances.

Similarly, Barnar was appointed Telepath Teacher, with Cathal his Teacher-in-training. The green ptero hopped from foot to foot, and several times trod on his own tail. Cathal stood still and silent, his eyes determined, his adolescent impatience curbed by a solid wall of control, the

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roots of an iron discipline. Never again would a ptero Telepath be allowed to lose its hold on its talent. Not with Cathal in charge.

As Jededias droned his acceptance, Peter's thoughts drifted. Barnar had all but relinquished his duties as Teacher to Cathal already. They had so much to do! Scans at the palisades, more rigorous testing, restructuring the Telepath classes — Cathal had some interesting ideas in that area —maybe someday a ptero Telepath as Senior —

Something pinched his mind. Peter glanced around. Cathal was watching him. The upper and lower lids of the hatchling's left eye slid together.

Peter ducked his head to hide his grin. A Terrell's duty, it appeared, had bound him to the Keep, after all. Strangely, he no longer seemed to mind.

(Films, from page 86)
the level of Keystone Kops in sheets.

5. Everyone visited by a ghost in these films behaves in a loopy manner that tells us if they act like this in everyday life, unhaunted, they must be part of the hardcore unemployable. Steve Guttenberg in *High Spirits* and Shelley Long (fast becoming the female version of Chevy Chase, which is not intended as a compliment) in *Hello, Again* and Mandy Patinkin in *Maxie* and Sally Field in *Kiss Me Goodbye* are so goddamned discombobulated that to identify with them makes the filmgoer feel imbecile and scatterbrained. Loopier than Billie Burke in her dippiest moments in *Topper*.

Which brings us full-circle. *Topper*, it seems to me, is as good and as durable a film as it is, a true classic, because it manages to seem real. To appear mimetic, despite the ghostly conceits that lie at its core. The same goes for the other films I praised. Even *Ghostbusters*, as over the top as it goes, somehow has a firm grasp on reality, and plays it off against the fantasy without insulting our intelligence, our sense of balance, or our common knowledge of how human beings (and by extension, ghosts) act.

Perhaps, at last measure, it is that proper sense of reality that makes a good ghost story work. If we are asked to believe in the unbelievable, for the duration of a film, then we have to be moored tightly to the mast of rationality by verisimilitude.

When that line is cut, we are cut loose; and we are buffeted by insincere plotting, by expedient action, by unmotivated and unbelievable fumblefootedness.

Perhaps, at last measure, a ghost story is only as good as it is real. Which is a strange thing to wind up saying about an artifact as non-real as a story about voyagers from the Beyond.

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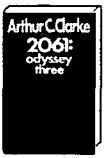

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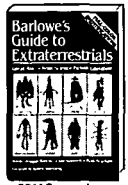

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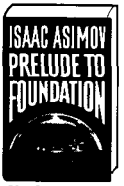

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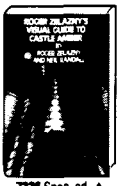

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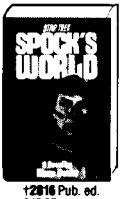

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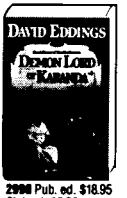

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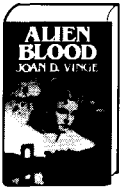

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